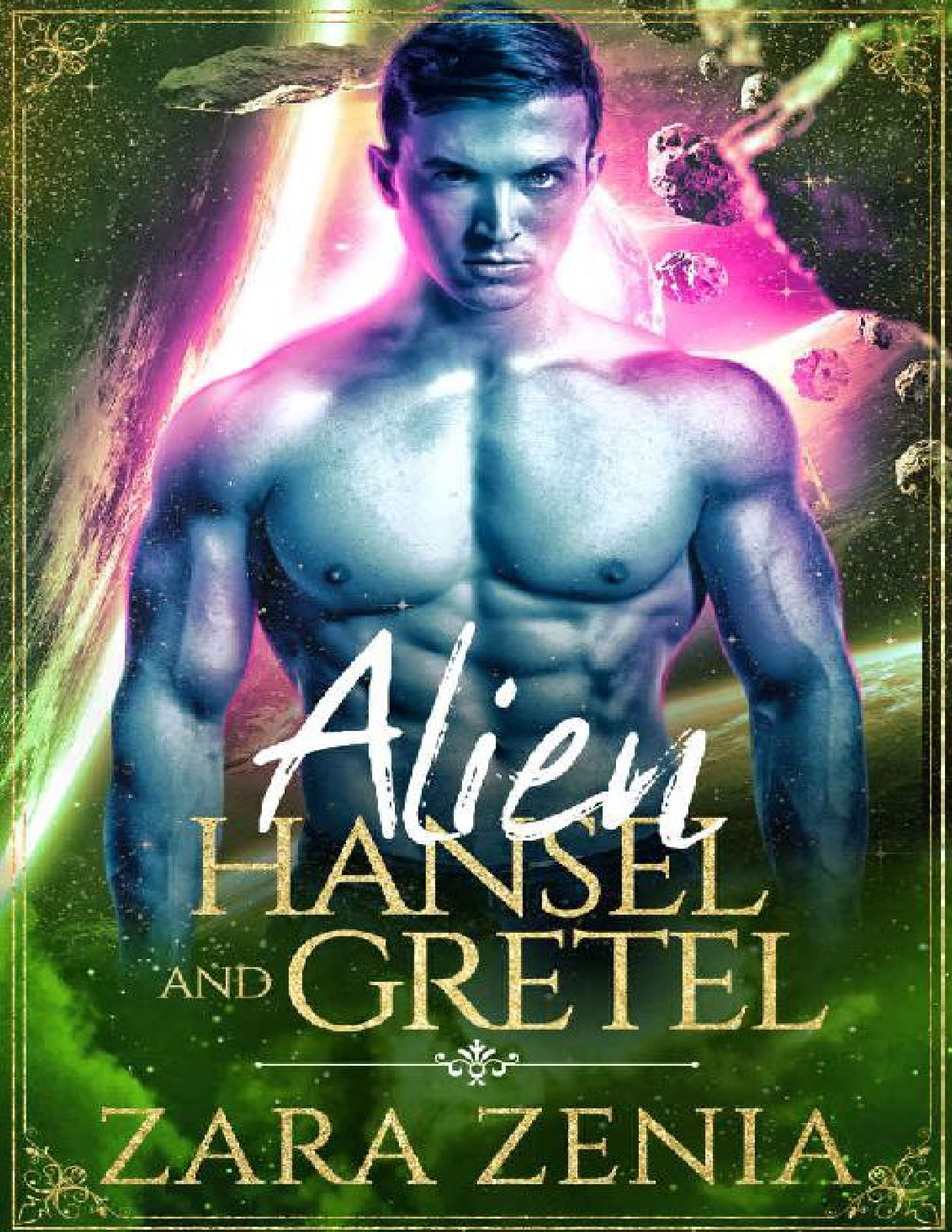
Alien
HANSEL
AND GRETEL
ZARA ZENIA

ALIEN HANSEL AND GRETEL

A Sci-Fi Alien Fairy Tale Romance

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CHAPTER I

NADARR

Nadarr entered the navigation cabin after taking stock of the supplies he'd packed for his trip to Earth. He was on a mission to find his bride among the ten percent of human women Trilyn men were compatible with. His older brother, Prince Floran, had found his bride, Amara, a doctor who'd been infected with nanites that Floran had managed to save, and now it was Nadarr's turn to find his one true love.

The whoosh of the door opening as he passed through to the room should have alerted his twin of his arrival, but she continued to stare attentively at the table in front of her. Gelissia was one of the few surviving Trilyn women on their planet and he was grateful that she'd survived the virus. However, grateful she was alive didn't mean he wanted her along on this trip. She'd insisted that she come and be his protector. Nadarr had rolled his eyes and insisted that he'd be fine, but she wouldn't take no for an answer. She was pretty stubborn, especially when it came to him. It seemed she thought he was incapable of, well, everything to hear her talk. But Nadarr was actually very smart and driven to be successful, though he did have to admit, upon occasion, he didn't have the greatest sense of direction and that had gotten him into some trouble in the past.

"Gelissia, we're three minutes from breaching Earth's atmosphere, what are you staring at?" he asked. "We need to get buckled in or we're going to be slammed to the ceiling."

"Of course, I know that, Nadarr," she stated, giving him an annoyed look. She turned back to the flight charts in front of her. "That's why I'm putting together the final calculations for the landing procedure. I want to get them input into the guidance program."

"Why? I already set the proper coordinates, it should take us right to Madison, Wisconsin." He looked over her shoulder to see what she was doing. She had a mini-computer in her hands, and she was imputing her calculations. "Gelissia, seriously, I already did that! All we have to do at this point is steer to the destination and use the touchdown commands to land on the planet's surface. The ship has been ready for this since the last asteroid belt."

Gelissia rolled her eyes at him which drove him up the wall. She always had to be right, it was maddening. She pushed away from the table and approached the main control console with Nadarr following behind. He grew quickly frustrated as she refused to acknowledge him. He moved in front of her and blocked her view of the various buttons and switches with his broad shoulders.

"This is unnecessary, I've taken care of the touchdown sequence myself. I know the procedure and maps by heart, so we don't need any extra calculations. I'll handle it when the gravity sensors pick up a high enough reading, just like the manual says."

"Get out of the way, Nadarr," Gelissia instructed, ignoring his assertion. "We both know navigation is not your strong suit. It's my job to keep this mission on track and keep you safe, so just sit back and let me handle it."

The words struck Nadarr like a whip, leaving a stinging, burning rage in their wake. She didn't have a job on this mission, it was his mission, not hers! She just tagged along because she couldn't let him do a damn thing on his own. She always had to butt in.

"What the hell do you mean?" Nadarr shouted. "This mission is mine, not yours, you insisted on being here, I could have handled it on my own, just like I can handle landing the damn ship! I've been flying it for years! I know how to do it!"

Gelissia's eyes, so like his own, flashed to his face, her eyebrows arching up. A moment later, her expression changed from surprise to anger. "You think I am not aware of it being *your* mission? It's not me who needs to find a damn human bride! I'm here to make sure you find the right one and to keep you safe from any plots perpetrated by the humans! And Floran agreed I should be here to assist you!" She slammed her hands down on the control counter, then took a breath and calmed herself down before he had a chance to comment. "We're your siblings and we want you to be safe," she reasoned, attempting to placate him, but he didn't want to hear it, she was just sticking her nose in where it didn't belong. "Nadarr, I know you're prepared, but you get lost so easily. I just want to make sure we get to—"

Nadarr growled deeply under his breath, causing his sister to stop mid-sentence. He didn't normally get like this. Usually he let her have his way, so this was probably his fault in the first place. He'd indulged her wish to be the leader too often. But just this once, for this one thing, he wanted to do for himself. Have this one thing that was all his. Why didn't she understand that?

"I've made all the necessary preparations. I've put countless calculations into the ship's database for this procedure and memorized the topographical maps of Earth. I may not be the best with what is right in front of me, but with all the planning and studying I've done I could land this ship in Madison, Wisconsin with my eyes closed." He stared down his sister, his glare penetrating her widened green eyes.

"I just want to help, Nadarr. This isn't your strong suit, so I thought—"

"I know my own faults, Lissi. I've already done everything necessary to keep them from impacting this task. The simple fact is that the mission and its result are for me and me alone, so I refuse to let you interfere with my decisions regarding it."

"Approaching Planet Earth's orbit in one minute," the robotic voice of the ship's computer announced.

"You're being stubborn, Nadarr. I'm not trying to take control from you. I'm just doing my job, as your assistant and as your sister."

"As my sister?" Nadarr shouted, instantly irked again by his twin's condescending tone. "You would never do this to Floran. This isn't about protecting me. You just don't trust me to do this on my own."

"Now entering Earth's atmosphere, please take the necessary precautions," the computer announced in the background of their fight.

"You're right!" Gelissia raised her voice. Her face contorted until it was filled with frustration, and she took a menacing step toward him. She poked him in the chest as she spoke. "I don't trust you to take care of yourself and stay out of trouble!"

The ship rattled violently around them, ripping the angry looks from their faces as they stared out of the view screen into the multicolored flames dancing around the exterior of the ship. The nose of the small craft flew rapidly through the layers of elements that made up the atmosphere of Planet Earth. With a vast wall of clouds fast approaching them, Nadarr realized it was too late to follow normal landing procedures.

"Damn it! You just couldn't leave well enough alone, could you! Now look!" Nadarr muttered as he strode to the control panel.

Gelissia dove for the captain's seat, wrapping her hands around the steering controls firmly. Nadarr's nimble fingers danced across the craft's informational panel, pulling up the radar to scan the readings of the surrounding area.

"The radar confirms we're over the state of Wisconsin, but we're about six or seven jumps from Madison. Can we correct our direction enough to make that?" He looked to his sister as she took manual control of the ship. All their animosity replaced by the urgency of the dire situation they were now in. The calculations for the auto drive were useless now, so it was up to them to work together even if they weren't on the same page. He quickly strapped himself into the chair next to hers, then leaned over and pulled the safety harness over her as well and snapped it into place.

Gelissia pulled heavily against the tension of the steering gear, trying desperately to lift the craft from its descent toward the ground. Nadarr stared horrified out the window, gritting his teeth as they slowly made their way parallel to the Earth's surface. Despite straightening their nosedive, the ship's momentum continued to carry them at a dangerous speed. Nadarr held tight to his safety harness as they flew above a dense, leafless forest.

He'd known it was wintertime in Wisconsin, but he'd imagined fir covered trees, white puffy snow, sitting in front of a fire, curled into his new love as they sipped on the Earth treat called hot cocoa. Not these scraggly, gnarled branches of dead looking trees and the ground wasn't covered in white puffy snow either. Oh, there was snow, but it looked dingy to his eye.

Moments later a screeching sound reverberated through the control room, causing his ears to ring.

"Damn it!" Gelissia mutter as the tree branches scraped along the underbelly of the ship.

"Pull up, pull up, we're going to hit that tree!" Nadarr said, his eyes on the view that was fast approaching.

"I'm trying! It's not stable!" his sister muttered.

The ship tilted to the side but rose some, however it wasn't in time to save the right side the ship as it was ripped open with a loud crunching and screeching sound as the metal tore. The craft began to spiral, it's speed and direction driving them through the treetops.

"Do something, Lissi!" Nadarr cried as they fell out of the sky spinning wildly, making him violently dizzy until his vision turned black.

The last thing he heard was Gelissia shouting, "Hang on!"

Nadarr groaned, his whole body hurt, especially his chest where the harness he'd strapped into was digging into his chest. He tried to straighten, but he was dangling weirdly from his seat. The ship had finally come to a halt sometime while he'd been blacked out, but it appeared it was now upside down.

He glanced to his right to see Gelissia unconscious in the chair beside him, her head hanging so that her dark blonde hair dangled around her face like a curtain. He reached over to check her. He needed to make sure she was still alive and breathing. He didn't know what he'd do if she was dead, but then he'd surely feel that seeing as she was his twin. He would know in his heart if she'd died. As he reached for her, shaking her gently, she came to slowly. Her hand lifted to her forehead, pushing at her hair, but it continued to hang.

She groaned. "What in all the stars…" she looked around and then muttered, "Shit." Gelissia released the latch on her harness but held onto the straps as she dropped to the ceiling. "What a mess."

Nadarr followed her lead, moving from his chair and massaging his sore neck.

"Well, we're here now, not exactly how I planned to arrive, but we're alive, thank the stars and heavens," he replied with a sigh, searching for an idea on what to do next. He hadn't forgotten their fight, but considering their current situation, he was all for setting it aside for the moment. "I'm going to head outside and check out the damage."

He stepped carefully toward a keypad, correcting his balance as he made his way toward the front of the vessel which was slanted down into the dirty snow. Tilting his head, he input the code that caused the craft door to open and the ramp to the surface to lower, only because the ship was upside down, the ramp was uselessly aimed at the sky instead of the ground.

"Wait, Nadarr!" Gelissia called as he looked down at the planet's surface.

He didn't really want to hear what she had to say, probably something about being cautious. Instead, he jumped, landing in the glaring, dingy white snow that covered the forest floor. He turned around and stared at the ship, seeing Gelissia watching him from the open doorway.

Shaking his head and frowning, he rounded the front of the ship and turned once more to face the wreckage, bunching his hands into fists as he took in the damage caused by their fight. If Gelissia had just let things be, he would have landed properly, but now the ship was nearly totaled.

He needed to come up with a plan and his sister would just have to accept his decisions going forward. Even as he thought that his sister's words circled in his head. His sibling may have believed he couldn't take care of himself, but it wasn't up to her now that he was on Earth. He was doing this for himself, and he would do it his way. With that thought, he returned to the opening and saw that his sister had lowered a ladder and was also standing in the snow now, looking up at the ship.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"The right side was torn up in the crash, and who knows what all circuits were damaged. The ship is upside down. There are a lot of cracks in the hull, I'm not sure it's repairable."

Gelissia shook her head and blew out a breath. "Well, first thing we need to do is get the ship right side up, but then I have the nanotech that I can set to work on repairing the various holes, and the cracks in the hull."

Nadarr arched a brow at her. "You think they can handle all of this?"

She pursed her lips, but then nodded. "Yeah, pretty sure. I can set them to replicate themselves and make more to help. Let's go check the interior before I flip it back over. While you were out there, I set the nanos to repair the engine. Once it's fixed, I can lift the ship and flip it, then set the landing gear on the ground."

In this particular instance, Nadarr was glad to have Gelissia here. She did know more about the nanotech and repairs than he did. Of course had she left well enough alone, he wouldn't need to have the ship repaired. Sighing, he raked a hand through his dark blond hair.

He followed his sister up the ladder she'd set up and started checking through the ship. There were cracks in the windows and a gaping hole in the lower half of her room, but the rooms were all still usable and easily fixed it seemed with her nanotech.

"Well, crap." Gelissia tapped on the screen of her mini-computer.

"What is it?" Nadarr asked from his room where he was checking to see if any damage had been done to the walls. It was strange walking on the ceiling with the bed affixed above him. It was useless to attempt to clean up the bedding and his things until they had the ship right side up.

"Some of the supplies were damaged. We'll have to call Floran to send more, but he won't be able to get stuff to us immediately."

"Great." He shook his head feeling a bit resentful that she had messed up his plans. She caused the mess, so she should have to fix it. "I'll let you handle this, and I will take the compatibility scanner and my gear and start searching for the nearest village or town. You're welcome to join me after you right the ship."

"Wait, what? You can't expect me to let you wander into the woods by yourself. What is it, we had a fight and now you want to go off alone? On a foreign planet? That's, insane Nadarr. You can't just go out there on your own. If you're really going to be that obstinate, I'll get Floran to send you back home in the next available shuttle!" she threatened.

Nadarr spun around, glaring at her. How dare she threaten him with being sent off the planet as if she had that authority! She was here because he allowed her to be here. For once, he was going to make sure she understood that she was not his boss. "No, Gelissia, you won't. You may have insisted on butting in on my quest to find a wife, but you are not in charge of anything. You may be my twin sister however you are not in charge of me. I refuse to allow you to take over. I will go out there, and I will find my compatible mate. You do not have a say about what I do, where I go and who I go with. Do you understand?" He stared at her, his words firm. "I won't prevent you from coming with me out

there, but you don't get to be in control, not this time. You will either follow my lead and do what I ask, or you will be the one going home on the next shuttle."

He waited patiently for her to process what he said, but he wasn't going to back down. This was his future, his happiness that he was after. He would do almost anything for her, anything except let her take charge of finding the woman of his dreams. He couldn't. This was something that he had to do on his own.

Gelissia finally sighed and she turned her green eyes down toward the ceiling of the ship in submission. "You're right, brother. I'll back off and let you do this on your own. I'd like it if you would accept my advice and protection if it's needed. We both know not all of the humans are happy we Trilynians are here. But I'll do my best to follow your lead going forward." She glanced up to his face and then back down again, her shoulders drooping as she finished.

Nadarr knew that was hard for her. She had always been the one to take charge, to lead the way, it was just in her nature to do so, but in this case, he needed to take control and he was glad she finally understood that. "Thank you, Lissi. Let's not dwell on this anymore. We have to find a place to sleep before this side of Planet Earth rotates away from its Sun star, and you still have to get the ship flipped over."

"Right. Yes, the nanos should be just about done with the engine by now." She nodded. "Best we strap in for that. Unless… you weren't really going to leave me here, were you?"

Nadarr chuckled, a wide grin on his lips. "Maybe."

They both used the harness straps to pull themselves back into the seats, and then latched themselves in place. Gelissia tapped on her mini-computer and checked the nanobots to see if they were finished.

"You ready?" Gelissia glanced over at him, and he nodded. "It looks like the nanos got the engine repaired, I'm using the mini-computer to close the hatch and pull up the ramp, so we don't damage it."

"Yeah. I should have done that, sorry." He glanced over his shoulder and saw the ramp drawing in before the outer door closed.

A moment later the ship lifted up about twenty feet, it wasn't completely steady, but Gelissia was able to slowly get the ship rotated and then there was a grinding sound, but it finally smoothed out and she gently set the ship down properly in the snow. They were lucky that the area they'd crashed in was a large enough clearing.

"What was that grinding noise? Do we have another issue?" Nadarr asked.

"It was the opening for the landing gear, it must be warped, but it opened. I'll be able to set the nanos to working on those too, so we'll have it ready to go back to Trilyn when we are ready to leave Earth." She pushed several more buttons, her fingers flying over keys as she got the nanobots replicated and set up with various repair tasks that they now needed completed.

Nadarr got out of his seat and headed toward his room. He took a moment to pick up the bedding and replace it on the bed neatly, and then return his things to their proper places. He debated bringing his journal with him but decided he didn't need it right now. For all he knew they might end up back here if they couldn't find a town close enough by.

"Ready yet?" Nadarr asked coming back out of his room.

"Yep." She smiled over at him and released her harness as she rose from the seat. "We just need to get our backpacks with our supplies and the scanner."

Nodding, Nadarr headed to their lockers in the armory. He tucked one of the small blasters in the holster he attached to his hip, then picked up his backpack which was filled with clothing, a few energy snacks, water, flint and a nano-light. Glancing over at his sister, he watched her check her backpack and then add two daggers to her pack as well. She flicked her eyes over to him and he smiled.

"Do you have everything?"

Nadarr grabbed the compatibility scanner from the top shelf and closed the door to his locker. "Yep."

He activated the scanner that had been created to find and assess Earth women willing to marry Trilyn men. Once they were off the ship, Gelissia used the mini-computer to close the door of their spacecraft. Nadarr glanced down at the scanner to see a strong signal blinking on the screen in response to his biological sample. His eyes grew wide as he realized how close they were, and he excitedly showed his twin.

"Lissi, look!"

She glanced at the screen and grinned. "Does that say Forest Bend? …sounds promising."

"Think it will be her?" Nadarr asked, half afraid to believe that he was about to meet the woman who might be his mate.

Gelissia shrugged, but her smile stayed in place. "Guess we won't know until we find her, looks like she's not that far off, let's go."

CHAPTER 2

CASSANDRA

Cassandra watched the clouds drift over the outstretched branches of scraggly trees outside her storefront window. They almost made the woods look haunted on this dreary day. It was a typical slow day for her with the smell of freshly baked pastries lingering in the warm air of her bakery. The quiet mechanical hum of the custom made industrial oven and the scent of warm chocolate floating around the small space warned her to keep close to her baking cookies and brownies. While she waited, standing behind the sturdy wooden counter with her arms propped on its lacquered surface, she daydreamed about a life outside of this town.

In one corner of the shop, a tv hanging on the wall quietly displayed a news report which suddenly drew her gaze. A photo of a woman's face flashed on the screen which Cassandra easily recognized as the recently deceased Julia Morse.

Julia and her company, the Morse Corporation, had become a hot topic ever since they first fell under public scrutiny a few years earlier with her vendetta against the Trilyn Princes. Conspiracies about Julia Morse's prejudice against the Trilyn's visitations to Earth took over the nation, ranging from mild to murderous. Despite her attempted sabotage and vain attempt to drive them from Earth, the princes of the alien world set up a program to select willing human women to marry them, carrying out these unions, and for the most part returning to their own planet. Though Cassandra had heard that they returned to Earth occasionally to visit and still kept homes here on Earth as well.

Of course, many ladies had signed up for the program and hoped that more Trilyn men would come and sweep them away from their mundane life on Earth, and Cassandra was one of them, though the chances of that happening were slim to none considering she lived in this tiny little town in Wisconsin, not some big city like Madison. Over the last several months, Julia's mysterious death had left many of the authorities' questions unanswered about the Trilyn and whether they were responsible in some way. Now, she wasn't so sure that she wanted to find a Trilyn man to marry her. Not if they were dangerous. Still, the woman who had married the Trilyn princes did seem happy, some had even had children.

Watching the tv, it seemed there were now even more mysteries that were unfolding coming from the Morse Cooperation. Curious to know what was going on, Cassandra picked up the remote and turned the tv up.

"…Authorities have reported that despite the death of their owner and CEO, activity has continued at the Morse Corporation. As you will recall, Julia Morse died under suspicious circumstances just a

few months ago. With her death, many of her operations were seized and workers were left without jobs. Now months later, with the buildings all tightly sealed, it appears work is taking place within the walls. Machinery has been heard running and lights have appeared in windows upon occasion, though no human workers appear to be within the walls."

Cassandra quirked an eyebrow at the screen; that was weird indeed. Maybe Julia Morse had been a witch?

"After a thorough investigation, it has been reported that numerous large packages have left the various corporate facilities and were picked up by private carrier companies, however as of yet, no packages have been delivered. We have a reporter at the scene of the Morse Headquarters here in Madison… what can you tell us, Charlie?"

The screen changed to show a bundled up reporter with a mic standing in front of a large fence with barbed wire on the top and a massive factory beyond that.

A small tinkle rang out from the shop's bell, making Cassandra turn her attention from the live broadcast and lift her elbows off the counter to greet the incoming customer. She lowered the volume so she could serve the customer. The familiar figure hurried through the doorway hunched over herself with her hands clutched tightly together for warmth. After entering, she quickly turned to close the door, trapping the cold air outside.

"Good morning!" the small woman announced, spinning around to face Cassandra. She removed her gloves and shoved them into her pocket. Her cheerful expression was barely marred by a slight sneer tracing the edges of her thin-lipped smile. "Or is it already afternoon? It feels like this day is flying by."

"I believe it's lunch time already." Cassandra awkwardly twisted a strand of her slivery blonde hair between her fingers, struggling to ignore the thinly masked tension between them. "Are you looking for anything in particular today, Sally?"

The woman had begun watching the news report she had pulled Cassandra from earlier.

"I'm here for my usual, of course," she said off-handedly, turning for a split second to give another disingenuous smile before moving to one of the small cafe tables and returning her attention to the television.

Cassandra was thankful for the distraction, hoping it would limit her interactions with her nosey neighbor for the day. She set to work preparing a decorative tray with Sally Kelso's typical order. Despite their distaste for one another, she was one of Cassandra's best customers. She came in daily to enjoy a fresh pot of earl gray tea and whatever baked goods were available. Unfortunately, however, each of these visits only seemed to fuel the small town's rejection of her and her little shop. Cassandra knew that this was due to Sally's gossip column in the local paper, but she couldn't do anything to stop it, so she did her best to be kind to the woman as she dreamed of a life away from the neighborly scrutiny.

Cassandra pulled a pan of her winter signature hot cocoa cookies from the oven, setting them out to rest before taking the freshly brewed pot of earl grey tea and plate of treats to her patron. Sally openly ignored the movement happening next to her as Cassandra set out a teapot and cup with a small dish

of sugar. She placed a plate with a peppermint brownie and ginger cookie, from her winter menu, next to the distracted woman's elbow, then quietly stepped away just as the oven timer chimed. As soon as she turned her back, however, the peace in the small store was broken.

"That Morse Corporation is interesting," Sally mentioned, resting her cheek against her knuckles and staring at Cassandra.

She rolled her eyes, groaning internally at herself for believing she could avoid Sally's snide comments for the day. She knew instantly that this was a ploy to draw out another story for the Forest Bend Gazette of which Sally Kelso was the sole writer and editor. Even knowing that, however, she had no choice but to answer or Sally would willfully paint her as a narcissist who ignored customers. Her dread began to fill up the bakery around them as she tried to answer neutrally.

"Yeah, I've been seeing them in the news quite a bit lately." She wondered if Sally even cared how she responded, or if she already planned to frame her for some ridiculous event that had occurred in the town. She'd been doing it for years, ever since they were at school together. "It hardly seems real sometimes."

Sally smiled again, the sinister undertone taking precedence in her expression as she met Cassandra's eyes. "You know, one of those packages arrived in our town last night."

"Really? The reporter was just saying they hadn't heard any had been delivered yet."

Cassandra's heart began to race because she understood there was some type of thinly veiled accusation coming and cursed herself for anticipating her motive so thoroughly. She tried to play up her innocence in hopes of saving face this time, all the while checking the temperature of her fresh batch of cookies. She moved the cooled cookies to a display dish and set it in the temperature controlled, glass case with her other winter treats for hungry customers to choose from. As she crouched behind the counter, the malicious aura from the cafe table across the room began to mount.

"Yes, it took up a whole corner of the post office. I'd never seen a package so large until they invited me to report on it for the newspaper tomorrow." She gazed at Cassandra through the glass, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Cassandra nodded as she stood, not wanting to feed into her narrative. Instead, she set to work preparing for the other patrons who might pay a visit during their lunch break. She had hoped the conversation would end there, but she could see Sally growing perturbed at her lack of interest and participation in the accusatory dialogue. Having finished her tea and snacks, the antagonistic woman approached the counter and tried again to draw out some information.

"The package didn't have an official delivery address, but that doesn't matter now anyway since its contents were stolen." She smirked at Cassandra as they faced each other.

"Oh, well that's odd. Why would it be sent here without a delivery address? Don't those usually return to the original sender?" She steered clear of the robbery claim, adamant about not being trapped by Sally's crude attempts at sleuthing. She paused for a moment, then wanting to cut the interaction short as fast as possible, she asked, "Would you like anything to go today?"

"I'll have some of those cookies that just came out of the oven. A half dozen, please." Sally leaned toward Cassandra, dropping the friendly facade entirely. "The sheriff wasn't sure either. Though, now that the package was destroyed to get whatever was inside, it will be difficult to find out. You wouldn't happen to have seen anything odd at the post office last night, hmm?"

Cassandra thought for a moment and shook her head, retrieving the cookies and putting them in a bag for Sally to take before placing them on the counter. "No, although I can't see the post office clearly from my shop anyway. The news keeps mentioning curious people who are really interested in those boxes, but you'd have to ask someone else if they witnessed anything odd."

Sally gave up, pulling back and taking her wallet from her oversized purse. "Well, Sheriff Katz is going to test the box and windowsill for fingerprints since it seems to have been taken through the window. I'm sure we'll know who the culprit is soon." She set a wad of cash on the counter, placed the cookies and her wallet back into her purse, then slipped back into her gloves before quickly making her exit.

"I wish him luck. Have a good day," Cassandra called half-heartedly as the bell chimed to confirm Sally's departure.

The short woman waved a hand before disappearing down the path to the main road through town.

Cassandra sighed heavily, relieved to be rid of the manipulative newswoman. She tried not to consider what tomorrow's headline might be and moved to clean up the messy table Sally had been perched at. After picking up she checked the time, placing her hand on an assortment of crystals she kept near her clock and trying to release the negative feelings she had been left with. She had just turned back to her work when the store bell rang out again, greeting her with two unfamiliar but beautiful beings as they stumbled in along with the blowing wind and swirling snow. In the last few minutes, it seemed that the clouds she'd watched earlier had brought on a winter storm.

"Hi. Welcome, do come in and sit a spell." She smiled. "Might I get you something to take the chill off the day?"

CHAPTER 3

NADARR

After nearly an hour of walking, Nadarr made out a path through the trees that seemed to lead to the marked location on the scanner. The weather had grown colder, and small, glistening snowflakes fell quickly around them as they walked. The brisk wind cut right through his coat, and he wished he had brought something even thicker. A glance over at his twin told him she was probably wishing the same, if he judged by her chattering teeth.

"It looks like there's another path up ahead and we're pretty close to the location marker," Nadarr mentioned, pointing in the direction they needed to go.

Gelissia leaned into him, and he wrapped an arm around her smaller frame. He was freezing, so she had to be too. She looked up toward where he was pointing. "Not too much farther, thankfully."

The snow stuck to them, melting against their warmth and leaving wet spots upon their outerwear. Floran had told them that winter in Wisconsin was cold and to be prepared, but this was beyond what he had expected. Soon they came to a building that had a gingerbread looking front, like the images he'd seen of bakeries in small German towns from a hundred years ago. The roof was currently covered in a foot of snow, but he figured it perfectly suited the building. The sign hanging from the eaves read: The Little Dipper Bakery.

Inhaling, Nadarr nearly swooned at the scents coming from the shop. They made his stomach grumble with hunger and his mouth water.

"What is that smell?" Gelissia wondered, her eyes bright as she licked her lips.

"I don't know, but we should get in there and warm up. Maybe the person in there has been baking up something delicious."

"I hope so. I wonder if they'll be willing to share." Gelissia smiled. Her enthusiasm was almost infectious.

"More than likely, we have to buy whatever it is." Nadarr chuckled.

Gelissia twisted the ornate doorknob and pushed open the door. A bell tinkled as Nadarr brushed snow from his sister's back. Nadarr wiped off his own broad shoulders and followed his sister inside, happy to close the door and the winter storm behind them.

"Hi. Welcome, do come in and sit a spell," a voice said from deeper in the bakery. "Might I get you something to take the chill off the day?"

Nadarr looked up to see a beautiful woman. She was tall, with silvery blonde hair flowing down her back. Her simple tan sweater and blue jeans were covered by a deep blue apron that was marred with spots of flour. Her hands gripped tightly around a small crystal she wore around her neck as she watched him and his sister with a polite and inquisitive smile. Nadarr could feel his ears growing warm under her gentle gaze, instantly enthralled by her striking beauty. He approached the counter, enraptured by her chocolate colored eyes and pointed features while he nervously hoped to ask for her help.

"Hello," he said quietly, feeling his voice catch in his throat. "We were looking for—"

Suddenly the compatibility scanner in his hand let out a loud series of beeps, causing the three to jump and drawing everyone's attention to the technology in his hand. He noted that the mark they had been following was registering as the woman in front of him and a wave of excitement flooded his body while he silenced the device. Nadarr looked up at the woman's face again to see confusion and fear marring her features as she stared at the device in his hand. He smiled tenderly, hoping to ease her worry as he tried to explain himself.

"I'm so sorry," he began again. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"What… um… what is that?" she asked, nodding at the device.

"Well, it is a compatibility scanner fitted with my DNA that allows me to find particular human women who are, well compatible to me. I'm… I'm from Trilyn," Nadarr said, looking at her. His heart raced, hoping she would be accepting of him. Not all humans were.

A wave of recognition swept over her features and her cheeks took on a rosy hue, leaving Nadarr relieved that she didn't seem disturb by his appearance but instead seemed to light up in pleasure at his words.

"Oh!" She spoke sweetly with tangible excitement as her eyes brightened showing off the golden flecks in the darker brown of them. "Yes, I know what you're talking about. I signed up for the program to see if I was compatible. I never imagined that I would be though, or if I was that any of you would find me here in this tiny little town."

Nadarr grinned at her enthusiasm, causing her to blush more when she realized how her confession sounded.

"I'm Prince Nadarr and this is my twin sister, Princess Gelissia."

"I'm Cassandra Moon, I own this bakery. It's so nice to meet you both." Cassandra shook his offered hand and then his sister's, her cheeks still pink from her awkward admission. "Why don't you have a seat and I'll get you both something to drink? It is pretty cold out there, and it looks like you've been out in it for a bit."

She gestured toward one of the few small tables in the store before they could deny her hospitality, not that he would. He wanted to touch her hand again and feel that spark of recognition he'd just felt as they'd shaken hands moments ago.

Nadarr watched Cassandra, admiring her beauty as she bustled about her bakery counters fixing things for them to enjoy. He ignored his sister's gaze boring into the side of his head.

"Nadarr," she whispered, her voice crashing into him, causing him to roll his eyes as he turned to face her. She leaned on the table between them, hunching close to him to keep their private conversation quiet.

He followed her lead, putting his elbows on the cool glass surface and tilting his ear toward her. "What?" he asked, aggravated that she was pulling him away from learning more about his potential mate.

She looked back at him with just as much frustration. "What was with the compatibility scanner? It went crazy when we came in here. Does that mean this woman, Cassandra Moon, is your mate?"

Nadarr felt his heart begin to race and heat spread across his cheeks and down his neck. "Yes. It seems Cassandra Moon is the match we were following on the scanner. Didn't you hear her? She said she signed up for the program, Lissi." Excitement built inside him, ready to erupt as he glanced over at the beautiful baker. He attempted to calm himself, but he wanted to know everything about her.

"But—" Gelissia started.

The light plod of Cassandra's footsteps caused them to back away from the table and leave room for the goodies that Cassandra was carrying to them. Nadarr smiled warmly at their host. She set a decorative tray in between him and Gelissia with a variety of baked sweets that smelled divine. As she rose, her eyes locked with his, as if she was just as enchanted by him as he was with her.

"I wish I'd made some bread or croissants today; they would be more filling than these," Cassandra mentioned shyly. "I was working on my winter menu so it's all cakes and cookies, I'm afraid."

"They look and smell divine," Nadarr murmured as he picked up a deep chocolate cookie with a sprinkle of sugar over the top and took a bite. The cookie melted in his mouth, and he groaned at the sweet, delicious taste of it.

Across from him Gelissia was biting into her own sweets, a powdered confection that seemed to have a chocolate center. She looked like she'd discovered heaven. Nadarr picked up the small cup of chocolate and took a sip. It was rich, creamy and smooth and he quickly gulped down the entire contents and then finished off the chocolate cookie and selected another before his sister could inhale everything on the platter.

Cassandra giggled. Nadarr looked up and grinned as he wiped his mouth on a napkin. The sound of her giggle was something he longed to hear again and again. It was sweet and melodic, just like she was.

"So, what brings you to Forest Bend? It's kind of small for a Trilyn Prince, isn't it? None of the other princes ever went anywhere with such a small population before."

Nadarr nodded as he picked up the fork next to a small piece of cake. "I was meant to land in Madison however we had a slight…" he glanced at Gelissia who sent a glare his way, "mis-calculation and ended up crash landing a little ways north of here."

Nadarr was acutely aware of his sister's scrutinizing eyes on him as he began to explain their situation to Cassandra. He tried to limit his excitement and play aloof as he noticed the concern in her face, sure that he was in for an earful later.

"Oh no! Were you injured?"

"We're unharmed." Gelissia spoke up, clearly unabashed as she sized up Cassandra, which left Nadarr feeling nervous. "Ship repairs are underway, and we will be able to head for our destination soon."

He wanted to reach across the table and flick her in the nose like a bad dorgan, however, with Cassandra sitting right there, he kept his fingers to himself, but he did send her a glare.

"How can I help? Do you have somewhere to stay while your ship is being repaired?" Cassandra asked.

Nadarr couldn't help but stare at her profile. At the mention of where they would stay, he perked up and interjected before his sister could comment. "We were actually hoping that you could recommend a spot for us to sleep for the night." As he spoke, a stiff wind rattled the windows and even the door as the bell above it jingled. It howled louder and thunder rumbled notifying them to the growing storm outside and the heavier snowfall that had occurred since they arrived.

"I actually do have a guest room upstairs. I live upstairs, it's an apartment with two bedrooms, so you'd be comfortable. I even have two twin beds in there, not that I ever have company, but…" Cassandra blushed. "Um, there is also a bed and breakfast in town, but if you don't feel like braving this weather you can certainly stay here. I don't mind."

"We would be delighted to stay if it's not too much trouble." Nadarr grinned, feeling ecstatic at the offer, as he actively ignored his sister's surprised glare. Never in a millennium would he have imagined finding his compatible mate within minutes of arriving, let alone be invited to stay with her.

"Great! Then I'll clean up down here, while you both finish eating. I can give you a tour of the upstairs after I close the shop. Not that there's a lot to show you, but I'm so glad you're going to stay."

She was enthusiastic and seemed to want their company, which made Nadarr very happy. He anxiously anticipated the tour Cassandra promised while he munched on the delicious baked goods she'd made. She was an exceptional baker, judging by this fare. He watched her pull the heavy curtains over the store window then she locked the door and turned the open sign to closed.

"Nadarr, she's awfully friendly, but I don't know that we should be accepting her offer to let us stay here. Maybe she's too friendly… what if she's only keeping us here until some nefarious human shows up?" Gelissia said, her voice full of suspicion.

Nadarr turned to his sister and rolled his eyes. "I get it. You're worried because she's a stranger, but all of the humans are strangers to us. The difference is that the compatibility scanner matched her with me. I trust her because the scanner said she is trustworthy enough to be my mate. I will be staying here tonight and trying to get to know her better, whether you like it or not." For the second time that day he had shown his authority on the matter, and he felt sure of himself.

Cassandra headed over to them and he stood. He lifted the empty plates he and Gelissia used. "If you'll show me where, I would be happy to clean these for you."

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly have you washing dishes!" she nervously refused, smiling with a slight pink flush on her cheeks. "Just give me a moment." She took his plates and Gelissia's, putting them on a tray and took it into the bakery kitchen before returning and motioning them to follow her. They moved through the kitchen to a door hidden in the back corner. Cassandra unlocked it and pushed the door open, gesturing up a set of grey, carpeted stairs before leading the way up the narrow passage.

At the landing, the three faced another heavy wooden door. A small window peering into the room beyond was covered on the inside by billowy dark curtains. Below this an intricately designed door knocker had been installed. It depicted a constellation that Nadarr recognized from his research on the humans, but he couldn't remember the name of it. A moment later he remembered seeing it on the sign outside as well and realized it must be the little dipper constellation.

Cassandra took out a key to unlock the deadbolt and handle of the door, opening it and stepping aside to let her guests in first. "Come on in." she smiled.

Nadarr strolled through the doorway without a second thought, a light coming to life over his head and sending rays across the darkened space. He looked above him to find a fixture that was also decorated in constellations, causing the lamp to shine ribbons of light which cascaded around him instead of lighting up the whole space efficiently. The way the trails etched across the wall and floors was beautiful and reminded him inexplicably of looking up at the night sky at home on Trilyn; a wide smile grew across his face. The two women followed behind him, Cassandra locking the door again before making her way further into the house to turn on some other lights.

The room around them flickered to life, revealing an open kitchen and living room area. Nadarr took in the space with his sister, then followed their host through the rest of the small apartment. Cassandra took them into the galley kitchen, pointing out the dining room beside it through a large open doorway. She showed them where food and dishware could be found if they were to get hungry. Across the breakfast bar she directed them to the couches that faced a television with a variety of star themed decorations and crystals strewn across a coffee table below it. A full bathroom sat off of this room. Across from the entrance was a short hallway which Cassandra showed them last. Two doors off of the hallway led to the bedrooms. They opened one of these to find a beautifully decorated space with two twin beds inside.

Cassandra stopped the tour here. "If you'll give me a moment, I'll get some fresh sheets for the beds." She smiled and then headed back down the hallway.

Nadarr and Gelissia both dropped their backpacks from their shoulders to the floor. Each of them settled their packs next to a bed and began to dig out items they might need for the night.

When Cassandra returned, Gelissia asked, "Might I have use of your shower?"

"Of course, there is one in the bathroom." Cassandra nodded as she set the bedding down on the bed Gelissia claimed.

"Thanks for letting us invade your space," Nadarr finally said once his sister closed the bathroom door. "Gelissia can be a bit slow to trust so we may have been in a tough spot if you hadn't offered."

Cassandra nodded, and her cheeks turned slightly pink. "I'm happy to help. I don't get a lot of visitors here, even with the bakery, so I do want to be hospitable when I can. Although, admittedly, I probably should have been more cautious." She giggled shakily, glancing up at him.

"I'm really glad you let us stay, though," he said, gazing back at her as he ran a hand through his hair. When their eyes met he looked away quickly, staring down at his feet as his face grew warm. "You're the first human we've met, and you've been so kind."

"As have the two of you. I don't experience a lot of comradery day to day, so this night has been refreshing." She paused, but Nadarr waited for her to continue, curious about what she meant. "That's actually why I signed up for the Trilyn program. A lot of people in this town are prejudiced against me so I thought it would be nice to escape."

Her innocent smile held a tortured undertone that pulled on Nadarr's heart. He wasn't exactly sure what she meant, but he couldn't help being upset that someone had made her wear such a sad expression.

She spread her hands over the comforter on his bed, smoothing it out. "There. I think you'll be comfortable now. It's still a bit early for dinner, but I would be happy to fix something for all of us."

"Oh, you don't have to do that." Nadarr was enchanted by her, but he couldn't allow her to serve them in her own home like she was a servant.

"I love cooking. It's my pleasure." She smiled again, the pink in her cheeks deepened.

"Very well, then," Nadarr agreed. "We shall be happy to partake of a meal with you."

When Gelissia returned to the room, Nadarr told her of the dinner invitation, then went to take his own shower. Afterwards, they both went to join Cassandra for a meal. She said it was just a simple meal, made of beef, and potatoes that she called hamburgers and fries. Nadarr recalled reading about them in the literature his brother had returned to Trilyn with. It was tasty, this meal.

After once again offering to do the dishes, which Cassandra started to refuse, he suggested he wash while she dried.

"Alright, I accept." She smiled.

Gelissia left them to it as she returned to the room they were going to share. She hadn't said much during the meal, instead, she seemed to be sulking a bit, which made Nadarr sigh. As they washed the dishes, and he passed her the plates, their fingers touched, making him feel that spark of electricity shoot through him again. Each time it happened, she would blush and look away from him.

"Thank you so much for helping." Cassandra dried off the counter and then hung up the towel. "I know it's not very late, but I'm going to head to bed. I want to be able to get up early tomorrow and make us all breakfast before I have to open the bakery," she murmured shyly, intriguing and confusing Nadarr. "Good night, Nadarr."

The sound of his name coming from her peach colored lips lingered in the room in a way that made the whole experience feel like a dream. He watched her leave the kitchen, then a moment later heard her door close further down the hall. A giddy sensation of warmth filled him from the heat of their

connection.

After he returned to the room, Gelissia tried to start up a conversation about the adorable baker, but he waved it off and went to the bathroom to change his clothing to his night apparel. When he'd returned to the room, his sister was fast asleep, and he promptly followed suit after their long, exhausting day.

CHAPTER 4

CASSANDRA

Cassandra felt the first ray of morning light caress her face from her large bedroom window. With her eyes closed she smiled in its warmth. She remembered her guests from the night before and stretched under her comforter.

After a shower she threw on a long, baggy sweater, fuzzy sock and leggings then brushed her long hair into a ponytail before heading for her kitchen. The shuffling of pans and plates drew her guests from the bedroom. While Cassandra worked at the stove, Gelissia stood with her back pressed up against the wall next to the dining room door. An off-putting aura spread across the floor from the alien woman, letting Cassandra know she was intentionally keeping her distance and putting up a barrier between the two of them. Although the aggression created a strange air between the three bodies in the small space, the baker couldn't blame the Trilyn princess for her suspicions.

She couldn't imagine what it must feel like to be in such a tiny yet divided town on a completely unfamiliar planet. Wanting her to feel welcome, Cassandra gave her a smiled as she raked her fingers through her messy hair, hoping to subdue some of her concerns.

Gelissia gave her a surprised look and then offered her own tight smile before pushing off the wall and walking out of the kitchen and heading into the livingroom area.

Nadarr sat at the breakfast bar behind her, watching her cook the eggs sunny side up. She'd done up several, not knowing how many they'd each eat. She put some wheat bread in the toaster and pan roasted some diced tomatoes then served the simple meal, setting the plates on the counter for her guests to grab.

"It smells delicious, what is it?" Nadarr asked as he pulled a star themed plate in front of him and studied the flecks of seasonings dotting the egg.

"Eggs, tomatoes and toast?" Cassandra replied, watching anxiously as he took a bite. When he seemed pleased by her efforts, she relaxed and started to eat her own breakfast.

Gelissia returned to the kitchen and sat next to him. Without a word, she pulled a plate toward her and began consuming her plate of food with little pause.

"That was amazing, Cassandra. I've never tasted anything like it." Nadarr's eyes sparkled as he met her gaze.

Cassandra smiled sheepishly as she took another small bite from her own plate.

"That was really wonderful," Gelissia echoed. "I can see why you make food for a living."

"Well, I'm sure you have plans for the day, but feel free to hang out up here, or if you go out, stop by the bakery and I'll be happy to give you some samples of today's menu before you go out into the snow." Cassandra was thrilled they enjoyed it so much.

"Thank you," Nadarr replied, standing from the counter and moving toward the sink with his and Gelissia's plates. "I'm not sure yet what we'll be doing, but I appreciate you giving us refuge."

"I have to go down and get the bakery ready to open, if you need anything, I'll be down in the kitchen."

"Of course." He nodded and washed up the breakfast dishes.

Cassandra thought it was nice of him to pitch in and do those when he was a guest. He probably didn't have to do such things back on Trilyn, considering he was a prince. He probably had a house full of servants to do such domestic chores.

She felt Gelissia's eyes on her as she left the room, but her gaze felt a bit more accepting this time and it lightened her steps as she went down to the bakery and started up her ovens. She set to work on her Christmas cookies, brownies, and cakes. The breakfast she'd cooked inspired her to make some croissants too, and with timers set on the other treats, she started to work on the dough, feeling the bright sensation of inspiration.

Once several of her baked dishes had finished, she put the carefully crafted rolls in a free oven and set to work arranging the counter displays. The clock chimed and she realized it was time to open, so she moved to the door and unlocked it, flipping the sign to open. A few minutes later, a swift breeze burst through the front door, accompanying the trill of the bell attached to the door. Cassandra adjusted the display she had been working on, curious about why she hadn't heard the door shut, before standing up to greet the new patron.

Her spirits fell like the snow when she recognized not one, but a group of familiar faces. Of all of her tormentors, the greatest advocates for her ostracization were the Reverend of Forest Bend and his parishioners. Some of those parishioners now stood in front of her bakery counter, led by Sally Kelso. In Sally's hand was the town newsletter from that day with an image Cassandra recognized instantly. This picture of her had been taken months before when Sally had stormed the bakery, with a posse in tow, to wage war on one of the pastries on the menu.

Cassandra had swiftly asked the mob of angry Christians to leave her place of business, stating that she saw no fault in using Polaris in its astrological context at her own shop.

The conniving woman had snapped the shot while she was yelling at the invaders to not break her glass tables and had become a regular staple of Mrs. Kelso's reporting meant to paint Cassandra in a negative light. She hated seeing the image and blamed herself for getting angry. She knew how vile Sally could be when spinning tales to make her out to be an evil witch, and she should have done a better job maintaining her emotions. Looking at her contorted face above the paragraphs of text immediately put her in a bad mood.

Sally held the paper in her hand up to give her a better look. Cassandra read the headline below her picture and found that the entire article consisted of Sally accusing Cassandra of breaking into the package at the post office and stealing its contents. She cited their conversation the day before, claiming that Cassandra had been the only one in town with knowledge of the large packages coming from Morse Corp. before the aforementioned robbery.

Behind the page the small woman stood, sneering smugly up at Cassandra's tired face. Her brown, bobbed hair bounced with her head as she excitedly questioned Cassandra with the confidence of the group backing her up.

"Ms. Cassandra Moon, as a reporter for the Forest Bend Gazette I would like to ask for a personal interview on the crime committed early yesterday morning. I would be happy to exclusively receive your confession for the robbery as well."

Cassandra rolled her eyes, not caring to cater to the mob before her. "I have nothing to say on that crime considering I knew nothing of it until you mentioned it yesterday and I have no confession to give. You'll have to look elsewhere for the culprit, although, I'd advise you to leave that to the sheriff since you have no authority on the matter."

She began to ignore the group of people, checking on the goods in her ovens and monitoring their timers instead. Her nerves clawed at the inside of her throat, but she quietly swallowed them down, knowing she couldn't give any leeway to her tormentors. Several of the attendants became agitated with her blatant disregard, angrily whispering their resentment to the self-proclaimed news reporter.

"Ms. Moon, it is my duty to discover the truth. We have eyewitness reports from townspeople who believe they saw you in and around the post office the day the package arrived several times throughout the day."

"That doesn't prove anything more than the fact that I received packages that day. I'm sure I'm not the only citizen guilty of that suspicious act, considering that I bore witness to others coming and going while I was there. That doesn't prove that I knew anything about the Morse Corporation package, which I didn't until you brought it up to me."

"Can you prove that you knew nothing of the package despite the fact that you were there that day?"

"I don't have to prove my innocence," Cassandra insisted, getting irritated with the interrogation. "Can you prove that I have a motive or even the tools necessary to perform the robbery or are you relying on the smallest hint of suspicion just so you have a reason to accuse me?"

Sally's sly expression changed to one of disgust as she scoffed at her. Cassandra tried to leave the conversation, wanting to focus on the ovens instead of the crowd behind her. She began lifting a batch of finished cookies from the hot appliance when a thought occurred to her. She turned to face the angry group, setting the tray of sweet smelling cookies on the metal topped counter in front of her.

"I'm still preparing the menu for today, but if you'd like to buy any of the finished goods I'd be happy to serve you." She smiled at them bitterly, knowing that whether they were cruel to her or not, she needed them to keep her business running. "However, if you only came to accuse me, then I'd like you to leave. You can bring Sheriff Katz back with you if you'd like to formally address me as a suspect. I'm sure he'd be interested in any information you have about me being guilty, and he's the only one I'll

be willing to speak to about the matter."

"As if we would rely on that man to do his job. Everyone knows he's against good Christians. We can handle these matters ourselves," one of the parishioners spoke up, his bigotry displayed openly for all to witness.

Cassandra grew impatient the sheriff was a Jewish man and very much unliked by these parishioners. "If you and your church were Christlike, you wouldn't be religious bigots! You have no power to cast blame upon others just because you disagree with their beliefs. Sheriff Katz is an officer of the law, and he is the only one with any right to question me as a suspect. If you actually believed I did this you would have no issue running to him to have me arrested, but you are all just harassing me because you think I'm a witch! If you didn't understand before, I would like you to leave—"

"Cassandra?" Nadarr suddenly entered the kitchen from her apartment stairs, taking in the scene before him with a confused and concerned expression.

Cassandra, swiped at the tears that were welling in her eyes as she turned to look at him. She was suddenly very glad he was there, and she felt a miniscule amount of her anxiety leave her. "Nadarr," she said softly, her voice shaky and almost a whisper.

He looked at her for a moment and then his expression shifted to something darker as he turned to look at the parishioners. "I think you people should leave. It seems you're making Cassandra uncomfortable," he said sternly, as he moved in front of her in a protective stance.

"Uh, yes," Sally spoke up, clearly shaken at his appearance and defense of Cassandra. "It seems I should come back later for those cookies since they're still baking."

With the confusing attempt at an excuse, the group quickly left through the heavy wooden door, the delighted shop bell dinging to signal their escape. Cassandra knelt down, trying to process the situation and feeling guilty for not handling it herself. Sighing, she looked through the door of the oven in front of her and was faced with the dark tops of the burning croissants.

"Damn," she muttered reaching for the oven mitts.

CHAPTER 5

NADARR

Nadarr went to the distraught Cassandra, crouching beside her to make sure she wasn't physically hurt.

"Are you okay, Cassie?" he asked gently, his voice only loud enough for her to hear.

She nodded as she put on the oven mitts in her hand. She sighed as if she were blowing something away, then bent to take the burnt pastries from the oven and stood up. Nadarr moved out of the way, watching her gaze fall upon him while she set the pan on the counter and gave him a half-hearted smile.

"Thanks. I got a bit more upset than I wanted." She turned and placed a mitt covered hand lightly on his chest, directing him to step back.

He looked at her with a conflicted expression, his eyes questioning her, but she turned to pull open the higher oven door that they had been standing in front of. The appliance released a plume of dark smoke, and another burning smell flooded the kitchen. She dejectedly pulled the pan from the rack and set it on the counter next to the other ruined pan and a tray of cookies she had taken out before he'd come down to the bakery. She gave him a disheartened look, as if she were the one that was burned.

Cassandra made her way around to the other ovens, pulling several more pans of treats out, these, thankfully, were all fine, and setting them to cool. After turning the heat off on the appliances she faced him again.

"Do you want to sit down? I've got a stool over there that I can set up at the counter."

Nadarr nodded, worried about leaving her alone. He sat across the counter from her while she put the finished cookies on display and threw the burnt ones in the trash. As she scooped the croissants off the metal surfaces she sighed again, looking up at him defeatedly.

"I don't know if I should try again or take that as a sign." She gestured at the flaky rolls in the bin in front of her.

"I'd be happy to help if you wanted," he offered, pausing for a moment before speaking up again. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Cassandra stood for a moment. She seemed to be contemplating his question before coming to a decision. She nodded and began to pull things out, then set to work on the dough.

"I've lived in this town my whole life. I grew up with a lot of these people actually and we were all raised in the same church. We went to the same bible school when we were kids and church camps. Then there was the faith choir as we got older and church picnics, all of that." She kneaded the dough as she spoke. "I realised in high school that I had a gift. Around that same time, our Reverend died and a new one was sent to us. He wasn't as tolerant of things he deemed… evil. Like my gift."

"Your gift?" Nadarr questioned, unsure of what she was saying.

"I can feel things… I read tarot cards and can divine things with crystals. I am connected to the stars, the constellations. I began researching all of it in high school, when our church was more tolerant of things. My parents were pretty accepting of me figuring things out for myself and, at the time, the other kids didn't care. Nobody did until Reverend Brown showed up. Anyway, things were fine at first. I opened this bakery right after graduating with my parent's help."

"I've always been really good at baking and even though I didn't have a lot of customers at first, eventually people started coming in and word spread. Soon after our Reverend died, and Reverend Brown showed up, my parents passed away. They were on their way to visit my grandparents." Cassandra's voice broke, and she stopped for a moment as she rolled the dough.

Nadarr wanted to reach out to her, comfort her, but he wasn't sure if she would welcome it at the moment. She didn't seem to like looking weak in front of him, but he didn't think she was weak at all.

"It was a very difficult time in my life. Reverend Brown started implementing all of these things in the church and because of that, I left it. I couldn't stay in a place I felt no longer comforted and loved me. The people of the church got worse, following his example. People I knew and had spent time with, turned on me. I closed this place for a long time after. I turned to the one thing I felt connected to; the stars. Every day during that time, I searched for some meaning in life to get me back on my feet. I turned to my previous studies and discovered crystal healing. After that I began to study energies and, through the same channels, learned about astrology. I already knew about tarot and began to incorporate astrology in my readings. All of this got me through the hardest time in my life and helped me find a purpose, which is why I put my faith in them. I renamed my shop Little Dipper and surrounded myself in that world until I felt whole again, and I've been happy. Of course, the parishioners got a whiff of my interests and started spreading rumors that I was a witch."

"A witch?" Nadarr smiled. "I've heard of them, green aren't they?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Cassandra laughed as they folded the dough into form for croissants.

She seemed a little more relaxed and that had been his intention. He followed her finger movements and added another formed croissant to the pan. "Tell me about this church of theirs."

"Reverend Brown's church is intolerant of all other religions. It's no longer the church of my youth. Now, I'm a practicing new age pagan, which doesn't mean much of anything except that I don't adhere to any named religious beliefs, though I do believe in God, not that it matters to them." She sighed and set the last pastry upon the pan. "The parishioners are really harsh to the sheriff, Michael Katz, too because he's Jewish. Which is funny, because they elected him. I don't think they knew he was Jewish when they held the election." She grinned. "He'll have a fight on his hands for the next one. Reverend Brown is a very bigoted man, and his parish follows his lead unquestioningly. It's like a cult, really.

That's why they harass me so much. All I do is read cards and the stars and use crystals in my decorating, but that's enough for them to hate me." Her eyes were on her hands, wrapped tightly around each other as she leaned on the counter.

He reached his palm out cautiously, grazing his fingertips against the back of her clenched fist. "Why do you stay here when they treat you like that? Wouldn't it be better to go far away?"

She turned and looked him in the face, the corners of her mouth pulling up into a rueful smile. "Despite everything, I can't afford to leave here. I have no one in my life who can help me. All of my family has passed on now, and well, my former friends are all part of Reverend Brown's church. That's why I signed up for the Trilyn marriage program."

Nadarr wondered if he should tell her about their compatibility match or if it would be too forward after such a short time knowing each other. He wanted to ease her mind, so he took a deep breath to calm his nerves. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that. My compatibility scanner led me here. And when I entered the bakery, the machine beeped, alerting me that we were a potential match." Nadarr's cheeks heated as he gazed at her.

"We are?"

Nadarr nodded and reached for her hand, feeling that spark of recognition again. "I can feel that the machine is correct when I touch your hand. I think you and I are meant to be together. I could take you away from this place, if… well if that is what you want." Nadarr dropped his gaze, feeling shy as he waited for her response.

Cassandra's hand laced around his, drawing his eyes to her smiling, flushed face. "I would like to get to know you a little better first. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for being so concerned about me. It makes me really happy."

Nadarr's heart skipped as he looked at the beautiful woman across from him. "Thank you for sharing such a personal thing with me. I feel as though we are well on our way to getting to know one another."

As they continued to work together in the kitchen, her warm expression returned to her face and by the time they were done they were laughing joyously with one another over little anecdotes of their childhoods.

"I should go check on my sister."

"Thank you for your help, Nadarr. I appreciate it." Her eyes sparkled as she watched him.

Nadarr headed back upstairs, his thoughts returned to Cassandra's story and her response to his offer. He shared this with Gelissia who was watching television in the apartment when he came in.

"I want to save her from this place," he said, the heartache clear in his voice. "She's so sweet and kind, and the whole town treats her unfairly. I could take her away from all of that."

Gelissia frowned at him, shaking her head. "Nadarr, you don't even know her. You can't risk your safety and your future just because you think she's pretty and nice."

"It's not that, Lissi, the scanner says she's my match. And when I touch her… I can feel it."

Pursing her lips, she shook her head. "You don't know that she's the only one, there could be more out there."

CHAPTER 6

CASSANDRA

Cassandra's heartbeat finally slowed to a normal pace after Nadarr had left the small kitchen. It had been so long since someone had shown any positive interest in her. She could feel the warmth in her cheeks and the dizziness of infatuation lingering in the air. To distract herself she checked through the cookies and pastries she'd prepared, adjusting the temperature of the glass case holding them. She kept busy plating the croissants they had made together, but once the buttery rolls were set amongst the other treats she was left with no distractions. Rather than assessing her prevalent romantic feelings toward the alien prince she chose to contemplate his offer.

She retrieved the bar stool from where he'd left it and sat at the counter to wait for any incoming patrons while she thought about the odd situation. It felt so rushed seeing that she had only met him the day before. Her first impressions of him were all positive, but his sister seemed standoffish and unimpressed with her kindness. She wondered what it all could mean and whether she should trust him. Despite her fears, she really hated living in this community. After many attempts to leave, she felt trapped, and this chance seemed like a bright light in the tunnel she had lived in for years. Besides, she had known to expect something like this when she signed up for the Trilyn marriage program, and she was attracted to Nadarr. Cassandra was at a loss with her conflicting feelings as she tried to figure out the right decision.

The sound of the door behind her drew her attention away from her contemplations. She turned to find the twins entering the kitchen from the apartment stairs, dressed in warm clothes and with their backpacks in hand. Cassandra tilted her head to look at the two as they approached her.

"What's this?" she asked curiously, sitting up straight on the stool.

Gelissia spoke up first, pausing just in front of her. "I made a reservation for us at the bed and breakfast in town so you can have your home back. Thank you for your hospitality. We don't know what might have happened if you hadn't let us stay here."

Cassandra nodded, taking in the information. "Oh, yes, of course. I was delighted to have you here and glad to be of help." She felt an urge to ask them to stay longer but pushed it down as quickly as it surfaced. "The bed and breakfast is really nice as well. I think you will like it." She smiled brightly at them.

Gelissia nodded.

Nadarr seemed to have something that he wanted to say but kept looking between his sister and Cassandra with indecision in his eyes. Gelissia began to make her way around the counter to the door and he finally stepped forward. "Would you want to show us the way?" he asked quickly, a small smile on his lips. "I have a pretty bad sense of direction, and we don't know our way around." He seemed nervous as he fidgeted with the strap of his backpack.

She couldn't help but swallow a giggle. She was enamored to find him as unwilling to leave as she was to let him go. "I'd be delighted," she said, gently stepping off the stool. "Let me grab my bag and jacket and I'll be right down."

She rushed up the stairs, tugging her heavy coat and purse from her coat rack before heading back to the twins, locking her apartment door behind her and then making sure her ovens were off in the bakery before following them out of the shop and locking the bakery door as well.

They made their way down the snow covered road toward the town. Through the thin, leafless trees Cassandra could see the town she had grown up in. With Nadarr walking beside her she felt a bit breathless, the strange power of comradery mixing with her typical anxiety. She felt a small, giddy smile creep across her lips for just a second at the feeling of not being alone. They stood facing the town square, the road below them stretching in one direction out of the treeline, and further into the woods the other way. A row of shops stood along it with a strip of street bordering them, leading to the looming buildings of the town hall and Reverend Brown's overfunded church. Cassandra slowed her pace despite her earlier confidence, causing the twins to slow beside her.

"This is Forest Bend," she said a bit lifelessly.

Cassandra led them down the center of town and to the bed and breakfast, pointing out details of the buildings that dated back to the founding of Forest Bend. She mentioned that she often delivered sweets to visitors but left out any mention of the tall tales that the owner, Mrs. Freeman, would tell her guests about the pastry witch. From behind the large front desk, Cassandra could feel the owner's squinted eyes boring holes into her back. Despite being a source of revenue and advertisement, they both knew that she was not welcome there unless she was delivering her wares. She began to feel queasy under the woman's hate-filled gaze. Reaching into her jacket pocket, she clasped the crystal she kept there to put her mind at ease. She pointed the way to the counter so they could check in.

"I'm just going to wait outside," she murmured and turned toward the door. Before Nadarr could offer any resistance to her standing in the cold, she made a beeline for the door.

Once in the frigid air, she dropped the heavy smile from her face and pulled her trusty crystal from her pocket. She clutched it close to her chest grasping it tightly as she tried to hold back the slew of embarrassing tears rimming her eyes. She let a breath out slowly, watching it turn to steam in front of her and rise up through the air. She had wished so many times to be like that steam and drift away from this place when loneliness had crept into her heart. A single drop streamed down her cheek, disappearing into her jacket and leaving a cold trail behind as the chilled air clung to the water on her face. Perhaps it was a risk to accept Nadarr, but it might be worth it to get away from this place that now made her miserable. As the weight of her life in her little hometown weighed on her like snow in a cloud, she swayed more toward the escape she had been offered.

A few moments later the door behind her opened, letting the twins out into the winter air. Nadarr smiled, seemingly at a loss for words despite his emotions being clear on his face. He seemed to not want her to leave, and yet she couldn't stay here.

"Are you guys all set?" she asked, breaking the silence and watching relief flood his handsome features now that the silence was broken.

"Yes. They are getting a room ready, then we can settle in." Nadarr's smile grew as he gazed at her while his sister stood by silently. "I'd love to order some of your sweets for later. I don't think the ones we had yesterday were enough."

Nadarr looked to Gelissia for confirmation. She nodded sternly at her brother, giving her approval for ordering the sweets.

"I would love to, but I may close early today."

"Why?" Nadarr frowned instantly, his disheartened reaction making Cassandra blush.

"Er, well, with all of this snow, I don't know that I will have too many customers."

"I see." He continued to frown.

"Um, also, I am closed tomorrow, so I was thinking… well, hoping—" Cassandra felt her cheeks heat despite the cold, "would you want to go on a date tomorrow?"

The uneasiness of being in the town burned away from her as she tucked a strand of silvery hair behind her ear, waiting anxiously for his reply.

"A date?" he responded enthusiastically, causing both of them to smile widely. "I've read about those. We would go get dinner and get to know each other better, right?"

"Yes. We could see a movie too, if you'd like. Or do something else. I'd love the opportunity to talk with you more." As she spoke her blush deepened.

Nadarr's grin grew as they made plans to meet tomorrow and go to a neighboring city to get a change of scenery. Cassandra left Nadarr her phone number if he wanted to talk any more about their plans for the next day and waved goodbye to the siblings, only barely noticing Gelissia's dark expression as she made her way back home. She had to wonder why she was so upset. Had she done something to Gelissia inadvertently? She hoped not.

CHAPTER 7

NADARR

Nadarr watched Cassandra trail away from him, a bubbling warmth welling up inside of him as he thought about her rosy, smiling face again. He turned to face his sister and was surprised to find her glaring at him.

"Inside. Now," she demanded, walking purposefully through the door to check the status of their room.

Frowning, Nadarr followed close behind, waiting as she retrieved their keys and led the way to the shared bedroom. He felt concerned and confused about her sudden anger, unsure what had made her so wary. Once the door was closed behind him she turned to face him head on and began to explain herself.

"You just met that woman yesterday. I know the scanner said you were compatible, but that's no excuse to put yourself in harm's way time and time again." Her eyes pleaded for his understanding even as her voice translated her anger. "I'm supposed to protect you, Nadarr. How can I do that if you keep going off on your own on this unknown planet."

"Gelissia, I'm not doing this again. I'm a grown man. I'm going on this date tomorrow and I have every intention of trusting the scanner and the spark I share with Cassandra. We've already talked about this. Why are you trying to interfere?" he questioned, walking past her into the room, as a stinging ran through his chest at her continued insistence on controlling him.

"Absolutely not. We need to get the ship fixed so we can stay there instead of in this town. Not only is your date dangerous, it's also not a priority. I can't let you do this when it affects both of us."

Nadarr spun around to face his sister suddenly, making her jump a little at his aggressive demeanor. "What is your problem? Of course this date is a priority! How is this affecting you so much that you can tell me not to do exactly what I came here to do? Did you forget that I am here on Earth to find a wife or are you just jealous?" he growled at her, tired of her getting in his face over this mission.

Gelissia was clearly taken aback by his questions, judging by her expression. She took a moment and he waited as she thought over his words.

"It's not jealousy," she said, sounding sure of herself. "We're stranded here in this town, where we weren't meant to land, and I'm still shaken up after crashing." She paused again and tilted her head, as if determining her words. "I don't know why, but this town has me on edge, and Cassandra is a part of it. Both days we've been here I've noticed a large group of townspeople gathering on this street. They

just stood at the end of the road all hunched together yesterday when I looked out the window from the bedroom upstairs before dinner, and today they actually came to her shop."

"You didn't mention that." Nadarr frowned, thinking about the group of people who'd been so full of hate.

Gelissia continued, "I saw a group of them hauling a box with a massive hole blown out of the side of it to the police station after they left the shop this morning. And I watched a news broadcast about large, mysterious packages like that one being sent around the country from a strange corporation." She frowned. "There was something odd about it all, and it left me feeling ill. Then there was the weird incident with Cassandra."

"What weird incident?" Nadarr asked.

"Before you woke, I went to the bathroom. I heard Cassandra in her room, and I went to ask if I could help her make the food, but…" She stopped and looked at him.

"But what?"

"She was playing with some strange cards and talking to them about us. I didn't stay to listen, but… it was strange, and I didn't feel comfortable staying there."

"I get your reservations, Lissi, but you're still overstepping." Nadarr was frustrated with having to talk about this again, but he wanted his sister to feel more comfortable. "You have to come to terms with the fact that this is not Trilyn, and these people aren't going to act in a familiar way. I can't let that interfere with my goal here, and you shouldn't either."

Gelissia dropped into a chair nearby, resting her head on the wall behind her and staring up at the ceiling. "I know that I'm being particularly skeptical, but I'm just really worried. Everything feels more than just the normal level of strange. I just have a bad, itchy feeling about it all." She looked at her brother, sighing as if she wanted to release her feelings into the air around them. "I don't think this foreboding energy is going to go away."

"Look, I promise to be careful. That's why I want to go on a date with Cassandra. I know I don't know her yet, and I don't want to bring someone home on a whim. I listened to what you said last time, and I want to get to know her before I go any farther. I won't jump into anything so can you please trust me."

"Yeah, yeah. I know I jumped down your throat again." She smiled apologetically toward him. "I'll try not to freak out anymore because I do trust you. Thanks for easing my mind."

"And for your information, she told me about those cards this morning. She called them tarot cards, they speak to her and help her through situations she is trying to make sense of. She has a gift, which is why the people of that church in town don't like her."

The two jumped at a sudden, heavy knock on the door, interrupting their conversation. After they recovered from the initial shock, both approached the door. Nadarr opened the heavy wooden door only wide enough for them to look out, blocking the stranger from entering into the room.

"Ah, good afternoon." A tall, stout man stood at the door smiling. He stuck his hand out to Nadarr, his deceitful eyes studying them through gold rimmed spectacles. "I'm Reverend Max Brown. I preach to

the good, Christian townspeople at the church here in Forest Bend."

Nadarr and Gelissia stared at him, making their unamused confusion clear to the man in their lack of response and contorted facial expressions. The reverend seemed annoyed at not being invited into the room, becoming disgruntled as they showed no signs of being hospitable.

"I thought I'd stop by and introduce myself to the town's guests. We're a very close knit community here, especially the members of my parish, and we love meeting visitors and showing them our little slice of the world."

"Well, thanks for stopping by then," Nadarr replied, trying to end the unwanted intrusion so he and Gelissia could unpack.

"Hold on now! I did come all this way. What would you say to getting some tea with me and letting me tell you a little about Forest Bend's history? It's one of our welcoming perks after all."

"No. Thank you for the invitation, but we're on a mission so we really don't have time right now," Gelissia demanded from over her brother's shoulder, clearly not feeling like being polite since the man wouldn't take a hint.

"Oh really? How interesting." The man continued to force the conversation, despite Nadarr and Gelissia's wish to end it. "You know, a member of my parish had mentioned they suspected you two were Trilyn when she saw you at the bakery. I suppose you stayed with Cassandra for a bit then?"

Nadarr nodded, trying his best not to roll his eyes.

"She offered us her hospitality in the form of her guest room last night. She was very welcoming and we're very grateful," Gelissia spoke up again, being honest with the stranger.

"Oh dear, she can seem that way, can't she?" the man said with a bitter expression, surprising both of the alien siblings with the contempt in his tone. "I'm honestly grateful that you remained safe in her care, knowing her beliefs and practices. It was wise of you to leave so quickly, and I would urge you to keep your distance. The girl hasn't been the same since her parents' passing. She's pledged herself to a darkness that no one can save her from."

The two looked at this strange, gray haired man in disbelief, which seemed to boost his confidence as he continued.

"She's a witch, you know, practicing evil magics straight from the devil himself. The members of my parish and I have protected the town against her influence by God's might to avoid any repercussions of her sinful magic. Now she mostly keeps to herself, but as long as she remains affiliated with those beyond the Lord's grace she's a dangerous sort. You really should keep your distance to stay safe."

Despite his fantastical story, Nadarr was annoyed and angry. The preacher took a step back as he must have noticed the hostile atmosphere. Nadarr took a step forward in turn to close the distance between them again before asserting his final statement.

"We may have only known Cassandra for a short time, but we both know your agenda here isn't based in truth. There is absolutely nothing satanic or strange about her, and you would know that very well if you'd pull your head out of your ass. Between Cassandra and yourself it is you who sounds like a

fanatic, preacher, while it seems she is a victim of your ridicule and shaming."

The preacher's eyebrows knit together as Nadarr's accusation continued. He promptly changed his attitude with the visitors, approaching Nadarr threateningly.

"It seems you've allowed that witch to cast her spell on you. You'd better come to your senses while you can still be saved, young man."

Nadarr scoffed, growling under his breath.

Gelissia interjected, "You need to leave, Mr. Brown. We are done with this conversation."

Nadarr continued glaring angrily, but the reverend seemed to accept Gelissia's words, retreating away from their door before turning to leave down the hall. Under his breath, Nadarr could hear him muttering to himself about their ill manners and lack of culture. The entire interaction left Nadarr on edge.

Gelissia tugged on his arm, dragging him back into the room where she closed the door. She sighed heavily. "Maybe Cassandra really does need someone to rescue her. I can't imagine being bombarded by these hostile townspeople and having no escape. It must be awful."

CHAPTER 8

CASSANDRA

Cassandra watched her feet sink into the snow as she quietly made her way back to the Little Dipper. Her cheeks still felt warm against the slight winter breeze. She pulled her jacket tight around her chest, smiling brightly as she approached her storefront. After getting the shop opened again, Cassandra sat back down at the counter. The past two days felt like a dream to her, and she was still processing everything that happened as she stared distractedly across the room.

The familiar bell chimed it's little, bronze tune, but she remained sitting, statue-like, barely hearing it through her thoughts. Suddenly a woman appeared before her, interrupting her line of sight and the daydreams of her new alien acquaintances. The stranger was petite with golden brown hair and an off-putting smile. Cassandra studied her for a moment, trying to figure out the odd feeling she was getting from the new presence in her shop.

"Hello!" the woman spoke up awkwardly.

"Oh, hello," Cassandra responded, making it obvious that she wasn't paying attention, to her embarrassment. "What can I help you with?"

The woman looked around mechanically, her gaze landing on the treats in the display case. "I'd like a brownie please."

Cassandra nodded at her request moving to retrieve the chocolate goody. She handed it to the stranger in a brown paper bag with her signature constellation print on the front of it.

"I was wondering if I could ask you some questions," the woman mentioned boldly as Cassandra rang up her purchase.

"Oh?" Cassandra could feel the ominous atmosphere boiling up around her making her wish the conversation would end. Something about this woman was wrong, but she couldn't figure out what.

"I'm Selene." She reached a hand across the counter for Cassandra to shake.

Cassandra had reached a point of awkward contrition as she held the woman's cold, gloved palm briefly against her own.

"I'm a representative news reporter from Madison, Wisconsin and I wanted to ask some questions about the Trilyns who stayed here with you recently. We saw their craft crash early yesterday and your neighbors informed me that they stayed with you overnight."

"Yes. They were stranded in the storm last night, so I gave them some of my extra pastries and tea, then they stayed in my guest room until this morning."

Selene stared at her, nodding. Cassandra noticed the woman's unblinking eyes as she badgered her with questions which she answered as vaguely as possible. The woman's doll-like actions and invasive comments made her seem less like a reporter and more like an invested stalker. Cassandra excused herself as quickly as she could to end the confrontation, seemingly to the chagrin of her customer. As she walked away she noticed the stranger continue to stare at her and a chilling sensation crept up her spine. She quietly watched Selene leave from behind her kitchen wall, letting loose a breath she'd been holding in.

Cassandra decided to close the store for the day as soon as her freaky encounter with the robotic woman ended, then promptly called the bed and breakfast to alert Nadarr. The front desk attendant, Lauren Freeman, who was the daughter of the owner, was difficult to convince, but she eventually put Cassandra through to the twin's room. After several rings, Nadarr's deep voice came over the phone and Cassandra noticed an immediate feeling of relief wash over her.

"Hello?"

"Nadarr! I don't know why, but I feel so much better after hearing your voice." She smiled brightly through her words. "Something weird just happened and I don't know what it means, but I had to tell you about it."

"Are you okay? What happened?"

"Some woman that I didn't recognize just stopped by and asked a lot of questions about you guys. She said she was a reporter, but I felt really weird about it because her questions were abnormal and uncomfortable. She wanted to know too much."

The two spoke about the odd occurrence while Nadarr clued Gelissia in, and Cassandra described what the stranger looked like as best as she could. The three agreed to keep an eye out for any strangers lurking around.

"Are you going to be alright alone, Cassandra?"

"I closed the shop for today. I was really shaken up by how she kept looking at me, so I needed to. Hopefully being out of the bakery will help me stay calm." She stayed silent for a moment before speaking into the phone receiver again. "I don't have a car, but we can call for an Uber to take us into the city for a movie and dinner tomorrow, if that's okay with you? With everything that's happened today, I'm just going to try to focus on positive things, like our date."

"Sure, that sounds great." His voice was warm and inviting. "Should I meet you at the bakery?"

"Yeah that works. Let's meet around 1:00. Then we can see a movie before dinner. What type of movie would you like to see?"

The infatuated pair made plans excitedly. Their giddiness in the interaction was thinly masked and Cassandra's emphatic hopes for the evening slowly ramped up. By the time the two gave their flirty goodbyes she felt much better about the inopportune encounters she'd experienced throughout the day. Her thoughts were almost completely consumed by her new alien love interest as she began to dig

through her closet. She found some dresses she'd always wanted to wear for a night out, but with the freezing temperatures she knew they wouldn't be wise.

Instead, she pulled out a pair of jeans that zipped up her hip and accentuated her flattering curves. A flowy, peasant top with a plunging neckline was the perfect match to make her seem both sensual and stylish. She paired this with some knee-high, heeled boots and a matching black jacket that made the mint color of the shirt stand out. She imagined herself sitting in a movie theater next to Nadarr wearing the outfit and danced around giddily. Her mind wandered to holding his hand again, making her blush. It had been a long time since she had a crush and she reveled in the warm tingling across the center of her chest as she thought about his handsome face.

Without warning an image popped into her head. She remembered dropping off the twins at the bed and breakfast earlier in the day and realized she'd seen the strange woman Selene then. She had been standing inconspicuously looking into a nearby shop window, but it hadn't occurred to Cassandra at the time that the woman was from out of town. The stranger must have followed her back to the shop afterward since she'd been spotted with the alien twins.

Chills crept up her back again and she peeked out her window into the street. Even with no one in sight, she couldn't shake the feeling of the woman's piercing eyes watching her. The shrill ring of her phone made her jump and she lunged across her bed to silence it, feeling panicked at the invasion into her fear stricken thoughts.

"Hello?" she called into the phone urgently, not checking the caller I.D.

"Cassandra? Is everything alright?" a familiar voice came over the speaker.

"Sheriff Katz?" she responded without answering his question, surprised to hear him on the other end of the call.

"Michael, please. I was calling to check in on you. Sally came by earlier today ranting about how she was sure you were responsible for the post office damage."

"Oh, yeah. That was to be expected. She came by the shop earlier to tell me the same," she said distractedly, pulling her curtains closed tightly.

"Well, don't worry too much about it. I'm at the post office right now and my investigation has already proven your innocence. It seems that the box was ripped open from the inside, and the damage to the post office was someone breaking out as well. No evidence indicates that anyone externally impacted the cardboard box in any way, in fact. It does create more questions, unfortunately, but I wanted you to know that you aren't a suspect."

Cassandra was silent in response, trying to think through what he'd said, but still finding herself focused on the feeling of being unwillingly observed.

"Cassandra, are you alright?" Michael spoke up again.

"Oh, yeah! Yes," Cassandra replied, realizing she hadn't answered him. "I'm sorry, Michael. I had a weird run in earlier and I'm a bit on edge. Thank you for letting me know about this. It really is a load off my mind."

"A strange run in? With whom?"

"I didn't recognize her. She claimed to be a reporter from down in Madison and mentioned her name was Selene, but she just made me feel uncomfortable." Cassandra could hear her voice shaking as she spoke but talking about the situation was comforting so she continued, "I'm sure you heard about the Trilyns who stayed with me last night. Well, I'm pretty sure I saw her watching us earlier today and after that incident she cornered me at the bakery to ask me a slew of questions about them. I don't know why I'm so paranoid, but after realizing that I'd recognized her earlier, I felt like she might be following me, and I can't shake this feeling of being watched."

"I wouldn't say you're being too paranoid. It all seems pretty odd. I'll keep an eye out on my patrols tonight for anything suspicious around your place so don't worry too much. What did the woman look like?"

Cassandra gave the sheriff a physical description and as much detail as she could remember about their conversation earlier. She felt a weight lift as she shared her concerns with her only ally in Forest Bend, and he assured her that he would look out for the stranger. After hanging up, Cassandra felt less distressed and began preparing for her date again, careful to close any open curtains throughout the rest of the apartment to interrupt prying eyes.

CHAPTER 9

NADARR

Nadarr placed the phone in its cradle with a thunk and turned to Gelissia.

"Cassandra seemed quite upset," he said with palpable concern.

"I am too, to be honest." Gelissia sat next to her brother on one of the beds. "I'll probably call Floran while you're gone tomorrow. I don't really want to be alone."

"Oh, are you sure you don't want to wait until I'm here?"

"It'll be nice to talk to him even if it's not about the ship or the mission. I'd like to hear his voice again. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, I don't want you to be lonely without me," Nadarr said mockingly, smirking at her. "I'm sure Floran will cheer you up."

"Ugh, shut up. We haven't called him since we landed so at least I care enough to talk to him," she poked back, moving across the room to turn on the television, then plopping onto her bed.

"Rude! I'll have to talk to him later then," Nadarr retorted. "We should get him to come visit soon. He could give us his input on this situation."

"You just want to use him and send him back to his wife."

Nadarr sighed. "You always twist my words. That's why you're his favorite."

The two laughed with each other and Nadarr was suddenly grateful to have her with him on this mission. He moved to his luggage to prepare for his first human date, humming lightly to himself.

After an hour of settling in and getting ready for the next day, Nadarr paced around the room without much to do. He was uninterested in the show his sister had zoned in on, so instead he approached the small room's window. The short frilly curtains were slightly sheer, but not enough to distinguish what was happening outside of them. He moved them aside so he could get a view of the street beyond the glass. They had been put in a first story room, so Nadarr found himself looking out at a sidewalk where a group of people were walking by, unaware of his presence. The ground was still covered with snow, and the little white flakes continued to fall inconspicuously around the passersby.

Amongst the small bits of falling snow, a familiar face appeared walking in front of his window for a brief moment before continuing on their way. Cassandra had her long hair pulled into a ponytail at the top of her head. A thick, white coat encased her thin frame, looking puffy and warm in the winter air. Though he recognized her instantly, she felt different and Nadarr was drawn to investigate this feeling and to see the beautiful human woman. They hadn't made plans, but he wondered if she had come to see him after her run in at the bakery. He grabbed his own coat and made his way to the door of the room, telling his sister he was getting some fresh air.

He was at the bed and breakfast door in seconds, rounding the corner to catch up to her, but she seemed to be walking quickly away from him. She was definitely wearing different clothes than before, which seemed odd. He was also certain she hadn't come to see him at this point, but what was she doing?

"Cassandra!" he called through the drifting snowflakes.

She didn't turn around, so Nadarr walked briskly trying to catch up to her. Suddenly a group of people surrounded the woman, causing him to slow his pace as he tried to assess the situation. They had approached from the opposite direction and began speaking to Cassandra aggressively. Nadarr felt the aggressive aura in the air as he drew closer, but he couldn't make out what the people were saying. From his position, all he could confirm was that the townspeople were berating Cassandra, as he'd witnessed in her shop earlier that day. He wished they would just leave her alone, picking up his pace again to jump in and save her if she needed rescuing. His speedy steps fell to a complete halt, however, when he noticed the group of harassers take heavy steps away from Cassandra. From the distance he watched the unexplained scene unfold in disbelief.

The people around her wore expressions of confusion and fear as they stared at the woman he had come to see. Cassandra broke through the crowd, the townspeople splitting down the middle to let her through and continuing to gaze at her back with scared faces. She rounded a corner of the sidewalk that went into a more wooded area and disappeared from sight as Nadarr caught up to the shocked group who had been shouting at her only moments before.

"What's going on?" he asked, even more conflicted after seeing their expressions of fear up close.

"That witch just picked Mark up by his collar and threatened to snap his neck if we didn't leave her alone." The man who spoke up gestured to another frightened member of the party, sounding as if the words were bitter tasting in his mouth.

"What?" Nadarr spoke with his continued distrust evident in his tone, but their reactions seemed too real to deny even if it didn't make any sense. "That doesn't sound like her."

"No, not at all. I've never seen her like that," the man agreed, despite his obvious distaste for Cassandra.

Without another thought, Nadarr chased after Cassandra, rounding the corner of the sidewalk in the same place she had before. The bank of trees curved diagonally, revealing a dirt path separating from the sidewalk precisely where the asphalt cut off. The raw dirt at Nadarr's feet continued along the road, arching into the creepy, leafless trees. Cassandra was nowhere to be seen.

Nadarr trudged down this path for a moment, searching between the barren trunks for any sign of her. Soon after entering, however, he got turned around, losing the path under his feet. He had wandered off the main path and into the trees without realizing it, losing his opportunity to catch up to his target. After some contemplation he spun around on the spot, searching for any section of the woods with thinner trees that may signify the direction of the road and town.

He knew he was lost at this point, so he made his way back to civilization dejectedly. When he emerged from the trees he found the sidewalk before him again and chuckled bitterly to himself. Only he could get so turned around that he would end up back where he started without even trying. He looked over his broad shoulder into the woods behind him before giving up and making his way back to his sister. As he walked away, he felt like someone was watching him from the woods, but every time he turned to check he could only find the trees and the soft, white snow.

CHAPTER 10

NADARR

Cassandra had gone to bed early the night before, feeling anxious from the events of the day. She woke up well-rested, in the early hours of the morning when the sun had just crested over the horizon. Without much to do, she spent this time preparing an involved breakfast that kept her busy. With her baking skills tested to their max on her early morning soufflé, she spent the next hour exercising away the extra calories before preparing for her date. Somewhere in her morning she managed to lose the memory of Selene and the bad feeling she'd suffered with the day before.

Nadarr and Cassandra spoke briefly on the phone to double check their timing. After the call, she scheduled an Uber to pick them up and take them into the neighboring city. Afterwards, with a classical playlist humming from her living room speakers, Cassandra put on some simple makeup. She stared into her reflection as she blended a light blush onto her cheeks, trying to calm her escalating nervousness. She hadn't been on a date since high school, considering the local men all sided with the reverend and his parishioners. Now her first date in years was going to be with an alien who wanted to marry her and sweep her away to his home planet.

Did she know what to do on a date anymore? Even more pressing, could she really run away with a man she barely knew, even if she did enjoy the date. She tried tirelessly to focus on getting ready, pulling her mint shirt over her head and letting the flowing sleeves dangle around her hands. No matter how much she pushed down her discordant thoughts, however, they kept rising to the surface. Would she be satisfied with leaving the only town she'd ever known to live with an alien prince, or would she turn him down and continue living as she always had? As the minutes ticked away slowly, she stared at herself in her floor length mirror, clutching a crystal in her hand to make some attempt at purging her anxious thoughts.

Finally she couldn't wait around in the cramped apartment anymore, so she wandered down her stairs into the bakery. She paced the floor, considering making some fresh cookies to sneak into the movie since she still had time before the car arrived. A soft knock on the door lightly shook the bell dangling above it, creating a soft jingle that drew her attention to the man standing outside in the snow. Nadarr's handsome face was framed in the door-side window. He wore a bright smile and Cassandra could feel the corners of her own mouth turning up at the sight of him. She pulled the heavy door open and quickly invited him in.

"The car won't be here for a little bit. Were you getting impatient waiting too?" she asked him

He nodded, his long blonde hair tilting with his head. He wore a tight, black t-shirt and a pair of simple blue jeans, but he didn't seem comfortable in them. He took off his heavy, leather jacket and sat on the stool at the counter as she had told him to before.

"I hope it's okay that I came early, especially with everything that happened yesterday."

"Of course it is!" she responded without taking a beat. "I was actually thinking of making some cookies to pass the time, so you saved me from dirtying my date clothes."

She giggled at the silly notion, but Nadarr still seemed a bit distracted. Instead of awkwardly standing nearby, she pulled out another stool and sat next to him, wondering if she should change the subject to get whatever was bothering him off his mind.

"Are these human clothes? I wouldn't imagine that your planet would have the same fabrics as Earth does." She lightly touched her fingers to his knee to feel the jean texture.

The man in front of her perked up at her gentle touch, a smile touching his lips as he shook his head.

"Uh, yeah. My brother brought them back to Trilyn when he returned with his wife." He ran a hand through his hair, clearly trying to focus on the conversation and forget what had been on his mind. "They're interesting. I've never worn anything like them before so I'm still getting used to it."

"Well, you look good," she said, averting her gaze downwards toward his brown boots and fiddling with her white painted fingernails.

"Thanks. You look good too." He paused, letting the words hover in the air as if he had more to say. "You're not upset, right? After yesterday, I thought Gelissia and I may have done something to make you uncomfortable."

Cassandra was taken aback by the strange question. She couldn't imagine where he'd gotten that impression. "No? Not at all. I'm sorry if I did something that made you feel that way."

"Well, it was just because you seemed upset at the hotel last night. I know you went through a lot, so I hope that walk helped, but I was worried it was because of us."

The more he said, the more confused Cassandra grew. She hadn't left the bakery all night, nor was she angry. Rather, she had been too frightened to do anything but worry and sleep.

"I'm not sure what you mean. I stayed in my apartment all afternoon after that stranger came by and freaked me out. I even went to bed early. Are you sure it was me you saw?"

Nadarr seemed conflicted as he tried to understand what she was saying. "I really thought I saw you being harassed by the people in town again. They even recognized you and said you threatened them to stop messing with you."

"I swear I would remember something like that. I was a ball of nerves all night last night. The only person I spoke to was the sheriff when he called to let me know what he'd found out about the post office break in," she insisted, feeling concerned at his sure evaluation of events.

"Well, that does make sense." He withdrew his assertion, seeming to accept her claim. "It didn't seem like something you would do, and even when I went looking afterwards, I couldn't find the person

responsible."

"I guess that's just another weird thing to add to the list from yesterday." She sighed, exasperated with the continuous chain of unexplainable happenings.

Nadarr's face dropped as he realized what a bad note he was starting the date on. "I'm sorry to bring it up, but I didn't know it wasn't you." He smiled. "We should focus on the date from here on. I'm really excited to go out with you."

Cassandra noticed his gentle smile and felt it tug on her heart. "I'm okay with that." She smiled back at him, genuinely.

The car arrived to pick them up and they gathered themselves for the ride. But Cassandra felt a bit awkward about speaking with the driver in earshot, so she mostly stayed quiet for the trip, looking out the windows at the scenery. After a short drive they reached the nearby town on the other side of the woods. It wasn't a large city, but Cassandra didn't have to tolerate hostility when she visited here.

The Uber pulled up to the town's small movie theater and dropped the two off. The man driving mentioned that he'd be working all night and would be happy to pick them up to return them back to the bakery. They bid him a polite farewell and headed into the building.

A wave of nerves swept over Cassandra as she realized the date was actually starting.

"This will be my first Earth movie," Nadarr said excitedly. "Did you decide what we're going to watch?"

"I picked out a comedy. I thought it would be the most neutral starting point and I really wanted to see it anyway, I hope that's okay?" Cassandra swallowed down her anxiety, trying not to make it obvious that she had butterflies in her stomach.

As she looked down at her hands she felt Nadarr touch her shoulder, drawing her eyes up to his reassuring face.

"A comedy sounds perfect. I'm really glad you invited me to do this."

Cassandra's cheeks heated as she looked into Nadarr's honest, green eyes. "Me too," she stuttered, feeling flustered as her heartbeat quickened.

The movie had both of them laughing as they sat in the dark room together. They made little comments to each other as the story progressed and Nadarr asked a lifetime's worth of questions. His confusion added to the humor, creating bouts of giggling as much as the film itself. By the time they left the theater they were absorbed in their own world, talking as if they'd known each other for more than just the past few days.

Cassandra had planned to have dinner at a nearby restaurant so they could walk there without any trouble. Nadarr was enraptured by all the strange, unfamiliar items on the menu and Cassandra was happy to describe them to him. When they finally decided on their meals they told each other about their lives before calling for their Uber again and leaving. Even with their extended time at the restaurant, Cassandra wished the date could continue. The whole ride back she kept imagining herself having conversations over dinner with the man next to her. The warm feeling welling up inside her

pushed her to reach for his hand which she grasped gently, staring out her window as she felt Nadarr lace his fingers between hers. In the glass of the window the two smiled at each other, happily gazing into their reflected eyes.

The Uber driver waved them on with a cheerful goodbye when they arrived back at the bakery before driving off again. Nadarr reached down for Cassandra's hand as he watched his steaming breath rise through the cold night air. Cassandra watched hers as well, seeing the clouds of air mingle together and smiling.

"That was fun." Cassandra smiled delightedly.

"It was better than anything I ever read about dating," Nadarr replied.

They looked into each other's eyes beneath the tree branches and stars. The world around them seemed to slow as Nadarr leaned his face toward Cassandra's. She closed her eyes, letting his warm breath tickle her lips before their mouths collided with one another.

They pulled apart briefly and Nadarr raised his free hand to Cassandra's cheek, diving into her lips again and deepening the kiss. Cassandra sighed against his warmth and felt his pulse quicken beneath her palm on his chest.

"Do you want to head inside?" he asked huskily.

Cassandra could swear she saw steam rising from his warm body. "Maybe not yet." Her voice quivered, betraying her own attraction and indecisiveness, but she didn't want to rush their romance.

Nadarr nodded slightly, wrapping his arms around her waist to hug her lightly. "Okay. I can wait. I'll wait." He smiled down at her, his eyes filled with warmth.

Cassandra felt a thrill go through her at his words. She didn't want the night to end, but she knew she wasn't ready to be that intimate yet. "Thank you, I just not ready yet."

He brushed a stray hair from her forehead and leaned down to kiss her once more. "I should go," he murmured a few moments later.

She nodded. "Will I see you tomorrow?"

"You can count on it."

CHAPTER 11

NADARR

"This town is very strange, Nadarr." Gelissia looked over her shoulder at him as she flicked the remote control for the television. "Half of these channels are blocked, the only thing we get is the locals and those nationwide news channels. There's nothing to do here."

Nadarr sighed as he sat down next to her. "You could check on the ship."

She glared at him. "I already did. The nanobots are taking forever. Floran sent the necessary parts to the geolocation of the ship, and they are working on it. We'll be able to move it closer at least soon. Though I really think we need to just leave and move somewhere else."

"Not this again!" He grunted and stood up, pacing the room. "I'm not leaving Cassie. We're making a connection and I'm not going to give that up to go chasing someone that might not even be there. Cassie could be my only truly compatible mate, Lissi."

"I didn't mean leave without her, Nadarr. I think she should come with us. I'd prefer to just go back to Trilyn, but I know you want more time here. I just don't think this town is the right place."

Nadarr shrugged. "I don't like this town any more than you do, but it's where Cassie lives, so we'll just have to make do."

"What are the two of you doing today anyway?"

"Something called ice skating."

Gelissia snorted in laughter. "Seriously?"

"What? Why are you laughing?"

She held up a finger, picked up the remote and switched to the internet, then typed in ice skating video. She clicked on the first video. It was of two people dressed in odd costumes that had sparkly jewels on them. On their feet were what looked like boots, only they had silver blades on them. The pair of skaters looked as though they were dancing as they glided over the ice and then the male skater tossed the female into the air and caught her.

Nadarr looked over at Gelissia in a panic. "That can't possibly be what she's talking about, can it?"

Gelissia grinned. "Maybe. There are hundreds of these videos, they even have competitions for them."

Nadarr swallowed hard and stared at the tv screen again. "What do I even wear for something like that?"

Gelissia shrugged. "Maybe they have something for you to wear at the place you're going? I'm guessing you'll have to rent the skates anyway, so maybe they also rent the clothing?"

He nodded. "I suppose so."

Clicking the tv off, Gelissia stood. "Let's get some breakfast before they stop serving."

Distracted, Nadarr followed her out of their room. He started down the hall, but Gelissia grabbed his arm and stopped him. "What?"

"First, you're going the wrong way, second, you didn't lock the door." She rolled her eyes and turned to lock their room. She lowered her voice and leaned toward him. "I don't trust the woman who runs this place to leave our things alone."

Feeling troubled, Nadarr frowned. "Why?"

Gelissia pressed her lips into a thin line and shook her head. "I'll tell you later."

He followed her down the hall to the dining room and then picked up a plate and helped himself to a couple circular, sweet, bread-like pieces labeled 'waffles' and what their hostess called syrup. She also offered fruit and coffee, which he also accepted.

The food here was quite different from what they had on Trilyn. Everything here was sweet, and delicious, though he thought Cassie's sweets were the best of the things he'd tried. Not that the food on Trilyn wasn't delicious also, it was, of course. As he sat down at the table, he wondered what Cassie might make out of the traditional foods on Trilyn. She'd probably make even more scrumptious treats. Still, they'd have to bring a supply of things from Earth for her, so she could continue to bake the things she loved, like those wonderful, buttery croissants. Just thinking about them made his mouth water.

"You going to eat, or sit there staring at it for the rest of the morning?" Gelissia asked, grinning at him from across the table.

Nadarr blinked and looked up at her. He shook his head and picked up his fork. "I'm eating, just was thinking about Cassie."

She laughed as she took another bite of her own food. "When aren't you thinking about Cassandra?"

"Oh shut it. I was thinking that we'd have to bring supplies for her so she wouldn't have to give up doing what she loves."

Gelissia looked thoughtful. "Yeah, I guess we will. Speaking of, thank her for sending those double chocolate brownies back with you yesterday. They were perfect."

Nadarr smiled at his twin. "I will. She thinks you don't like her."

Gelissia gaped at him. "What? I do. I just… I guess I wasn't overly friendly, but, well, you know I'm not good at trusting…" She looked down at her now empty plate and sighed. "Tell her I do, please. I

may not be head over ass for her like you, but I think she's a very nice and kind person."

Nadarr's smile turned to a grin. "I will tell her." He wiped his mouth on a napkin and stood up. He picked up his paper plate, napkin, utensils and cup and deposited them in the waste bin. "I should go get ready."

Gelissia nodded. "I think I may take one of those car things to the next town over. Get a change of scenery."

"Do you have enough Earth money?"

She nodded, and said, "Yeah," as she tossed her garbage in the bin and followed him back down the hallway toward their room.

Nadarr headed into the bathroom with his clothes for his date with Cassandra and after a shower, changed into them. He strode out, dressed and ready to go. "You'll be alright on your own?"

"Sure. Have fun." Gelissia gave him a smile. "I'm going to get ready myself and call that number Cassandra gave you for the car thing. See you back here later?"

"Well, maybe…"

"Maybe?" She narrowed her eyes at him and frowned. "What do you mean maybe?"

"Well, if things go well today, I may stay with Cassandra."

"Oh." A shadow passed over her eyes and she looked away.

Nadarr paused and then went over to his twin. "I want her to become my wife, Lissi. I'm not replacing you."

Gelissia flicked her eyes up to his and gave him a slow nod. "I know. It's just that it's always been the two of us and now…"

"And now you'll have a sister. At least I hope that is what will be the outcome."

Gelissia gave him a half smile. "That might be nice. Very well, have a fun time and if you aren't back by ten, I'll expect you are staying with Cassandra and head to bed."

"Thank you, sister." Nadarr smiled, picked up his coat, scarf, and gloves, and with a wave, headed out the door.

He left the bed and breakfast, heading out of town and toward Cassandra's bakery just past the first grouping of trees on the outskirts of Forest Bend. It was a nice walk with the sun shining and the brisk winter air. Fifteen minutes later he arrived at the bakery and knocked on the door.

Cassandra's smiling face appeared in the window and then she opened the door. "Hi, come on in."

Nadarr stepped through the doorway and greeted her with a quick kiss to the cheek. "How are you this morning?"

Her smile grew. "I'm good. Are you ready to go? We've got a walk ahead of us. The outdoor rink is on the other side of town. I should have mentioned that before. I could have come to get you on the way there."

"No, I like walking with you the whole way." Nadarr reached for her hand. "I have a question though."

"Oh?" Cassandra furrowed her brow.

"Do they have the clothing as well as the skates for us at this outdoor rink, and where will we change clothes?"

One of Cassandra's eyebrows raised, and she looked confused. "What do you mean? There aren't any special clothes to wear to go ice skating, well, other than a heavy coat, gloves and maybe a scarf or hat to keep you warm."

Nadarr was now the one confused. "But Lissi showed me ice skating on the tv, they wore sparkly clothes and I have to admit, it looks a bit difficult, I don't know that I want to risk throwing you in the air. I might break you."

Cassandra started laughing and shaking her head. "No, no, that's figure skating, we aren't doing that. This is just gliding around in a circle, kind of." She giggled some more. "I promise, you won't have to throw me in the air and catch me."

"Oh, thank goodness, because I was just a little bit worried there." He grinned.

"Let me just grab my skates and we can go." She headed over to the chairs where her coat, gloves, scarf and skates were.

Nadarr took the coat from her and held it open for her to slip into it, then as she zipped it up, he picked up her scarf and wrapped it around her neck. "There you go."

She picked up the skates and put the laces over her shoulder so one laid on her chest and the other on her back. Then, after putting on her gloves, she grabbed her keys and wallet. "I think I'm ready now."

They went out the door and she locked it, then put the keys in her pocket. They walked back toward Forest Bend, but when they reached the outskirts of the town, they went down a street Nadarr hadn't been on before. They chatted the whole way about various things, but the whole way there, Nadarr felt as though he was being watched. It was a strange feeling that made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, but when he looked around, he couldn't see anyone that was paying them any particular attention.

"There it is." Cassandra pointed. "We just have to stop at the little kiosk and get your skates."

"Great." Nadarr followed her to the small building at the edge of the rink. There was a little patio with tables and then benches along the edges of the rink as well for people to sit and rest or watch the other skaters. Nadarr gave the man his shoe size and paid for the skate rental.

"Enjoy," the man said as he handed over the skates. Behind him, Nadarr could see he sold hot cocoa, salted pretzels, popcorn, hot dogs and chips. "If you need anything else, we're open all afternoon into

early evening."

"Thanks, Fred." Cassandra gave him a nod. As they walked over toward a bench next to the rink, she murmured, "He's not one of the parishioners, which is why I like coming here. He sometimes places an order with the bakery to resell here to those who skate."

"I see," Nadarr said as he sat down and took off his shoes. He was glad he'd word thick socks as he slid his feet into the skates and laced them up. He followed Cassie's directions and wrapped the long laces around his ankles and then tied them.

Cassandra stood up and reached for the rail that circled the rink. "Try standing."

Nadarr got his feet under him and stood, but then immediately lost his balance and grasped at the rail next to her. "Whoa!" Finally he was able to pull himself up properly. "How do you work these things, Cassie?"

She laughed. "Just follow my lead and hold onto the rail until we get to the ice. It will be easier to move once you're out there."

"If you say so." He followed her, holding tightly to the slick silver rail.

A moment later, Cassandra stepped onto the ice and then glided forward effortlessly. Nadarr attempted to do the same but landed on his butt. He fell backwards and laughed.

"Well, that went well." He continued to chuckle as he scooted over to the rail and pulled himself up again, this time on the ice. It took some doing, but he finally found his balance. "Okay, now what?"

"Okay, so watch me for a minute." Cassie pushed off with one foot, using her legs to propel her forward in a glide, alternating feet to continue her momentum forward, then she spun around and skated back to him. "Now you try it."

Blowing out a breath, Nadarr let go of the rail. He attempted to do as she had, pushed off with one foot and glided forward, and it worked, for about a half a minute. Then he began to wobble, and he set his other foot down to get his balance back, but he overcompensated and ended up on his butt again.

"That was good!"

He looked over his shoulder at her and arched a brow. "Really?"

She shook her head and laughed. "No, but you'll get it. Let's try again."

They spent the next hour practicing until he finally managed to get it and was able to make it completely around the rink without falling down. "That calls for a celebration, how about some hot cocoa?"

"You just want off the rink," Cassie said, laughing. "Come on, let's get some cocoa and hotdogs, then we'll try something more complicated."

Nadarr gave her a look of surprise. "More complicated?"

She grinned. "Yes, we're going to try and skate together, holding hands."

"Ah, well I will definitely work hard and master that. As long as I don't have to try and lift you and toss you about like they did in that video. I have no idea how they manage that! I can't hardly even stay on my own two feet."

"Years and years of practice. They start really young and skate every day. A lot of them spend more time skating than doing anything else."

After drinking the cocoa and eating a couple of hotdogs they went back out on the ice and skated for another two hours, this time holding hands which Nadarr was thrilled with. He liked having her smaller hand in his. The only thing marring his day with her was that feeling of being watched.

"Something wrong?" Cassie asked.

"I don't know. I have been feeling like someone's been watching us all afternoon."

She nodded. "I've been feeling it too, but I can't figure out where it's coming from. It's not Fred and the only others here are those couples," she tilted her head toward the three other couples skating together, "and they aren't interested in us."

"No, it feels like they aren't here on the ice, but out there toward those trees."

Cassandra turned her head and looked. Her eyes narrowed and she said, "There is someone out there. We should go see what they're doing."

"Now?"

She shrugged. "Sure, we can take our skates off and then go see what they're up to."

"I didn't mean to ruin our afternoon." Nadarr frowned.

"You didn't," she said, shaking her head and giving him a smile. "We can go figure out what they're up to, then head back to the bakery. I thought I'd cook us dinner, if you want to stay?" her already rosy turned a little more red.

"I would love to." He squeezed her fingers in his and they left the rink for the benches where they left their shoes.

After changing, they returned the rented skates and Cassie asked, "Fred, would you mind storing my skates? I'll pick them up tomorrow when I bring your order."

"Sure thing," he replied, taking her skates as well. "Have fun, you two."

They turned and started walking back toward the rink, looking beyond it toward the woods. "Do you see them?"

Cassandra nodded. "Just over there, in that white coat that looks a little like mine. In fact, if I'm not mistaken, her hair is the same silvery blonde color mine is, which is just strange, because I've never seen anyone else with hair like mine."

They walked faster and the person in the coat moved further back in the trees, so they started to jog forward. The closer they got to the woods, the further away the person moved. They broke through the trees and in the dim light they couldn't see them.

"Where did they go?" Nadarr asked.

Cassandra stopped and looked at the ground, but it was leaf strewn and she couldn't make out any footprints or see anything that would indicate which way they went. "I don't know. Really weird though that they took off like that."

Nadarr nodded. "I don't like it, Cassie. Something very strange is going on in this town of yours."

"I couldn't agree with you more."

CHAPTER 12

CASSANDRA

Cassandra laced her fingers with Nadarr's as they turned to leave the forest. "I wonder who they were." She looked over her shoulder deeper into the woods behind them.

"Probably someone up to no good."

"Probably," she murmured, but she couldn't shake the feeling of foreboding as they left the darkness of the forest for the open field.

The sun was getting lower in the sky and the wind was picking up, making the already chilly afternoon turn a little more frigid. She shivered and shoved her other hand in her pocket to keep it warm.

"Are you cold?" Nadarr asked.

"Yeah, a bit." She nodded.

He let go of her hand and she felt bereft for a moment, but then he dropped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her a little closer to his side. "Better?"

She smiled and looked up at him. "Yes." She wrapped her arm around his waist and stuck her fingers in the back pocket of his jeans.

He grinned as they walked. "Well, at least I no longer feel like we're being watched."

Cassandra thought about it for a moment and then nodded. "Yeah, me either."

When they arrived back at the bakery, she opened the door and was so glad for the welcoming heat of the furnace. After locking up, they headed upstairs to her apartment. She took off her coat, scarf and gloves, hanging them on the coatrack. Nadarr did the same and for the first time all day, she noticed how good he looked in his blue polo and jeans. Then she started to wonder what he'd look like out of his polo and jeans.

"Do you want me to help?"

Blinking, she gave him a quizzical look. "What?"

"With dinner?"

"Oh, sure, that might be fun." She felt her cheeks heat as they headed to the kitchen. "I thought we could make pizza."

"I've wanted to try that." Nadarr gave her a sexy grin.

Cassandra felt heat pool low in her stomach. She was extremely turned on, and she didn't know what to do. Her face felt like it was on fire. Did he know how sexy he was? Did he know that every time he touched her a little thrill of excitement raced through her? That she couldn't wait until he touched her more intimately?

She hadn't been ready a few days ago, but they'd spent several days getting to know one another with him doing no more than giving her soft gentle kisses and it was driving her crazy. She wanted him. Things felt right now, and she hoped he'd ask to stay again tonight, because she didn't want him to leave.

"Cassie?"

Even the sound of the nickname he'd given her sounded sexy. She was ready to melt right there just listening to his voice.

"Cassie, you okay?" he asked as he touched her arm.

Her stomach tightened and she finally realized he was actually trying to get her attention and she blushed even harder, if that was possible. "Um, yes, yes, fine. I'm good." She nodded and turned toward the refrigerator. "I'll just grab the ingredients."

Nadarr washed his hands as she pulled things out. "What can I do?"

"Well we've got all kinds of things we can put on it, what do you like?" she asked as she showed him everything.

They decided on pepperoni, mushrooms, peppers, tomatoes, and olives. He chopped things up as she prepared the dough. The whole time they talked and laughed, and Cassandra realized she had never had more fun in her life than today.

"How about we watch a movie?" she suggested as they put the pizza in the oven.

She set the timer and they snuggled together on the couch as she turned on a movie. Once the pizza was done, she plated it, poured them each a glass of wine and they ate together as they finished the movie. It was an older romantic comedy, and when it got to the scene where the main characters finally realized they loved each other, she glanced shyly over at Nadarr, and licked her lips.

Nadarr leaned down and kissed her, his hand cupping her cheek as he gently brushed his lips against hers, and then he brought his other hand up too and his fingers were in her hair as he deepened the kiss. Cassie threw her arms around his neck and pressed into him. She tugged at his shirt, pulling it up. They broke apart long enough for her to remove it, and then went right back to kissing as she explored his hard chest with her fingers.

Nadarr's hands moved from her face and hair to skim over her body. He wasn't as bold as Cassandra was and she grinned as she leaned back a little and pulled her own shirt off over her head and tossed

it to the floor.

"Are you sure?" Nadarr asked, gazing into her eyes.

"Yes." Cassandra stood up and reached for him.

He took her hand and she led him to her bedroom. Once there she kicked the door closed, then turned and looked up at him. She bit her lip shyly as she unhooked her bra and dropped it to the floor. Nadarr moved toward her, pulling her into his arms. He kissed her lips, then trailed kisses over her jaw, down her neck, behind her ear and lifted her in his arms.

Cassie wrapped her legs around his waist and her arms around his neck as he took one nipple in his mouth and sucked on it, then circled it with his tongue. She gasped at the sensations he was causing. "Bed…" she murmured as she planted kisses on his neck by his ear.

"Mmmm," he groaned. "You're beautiful." He moved them to the bed, setting her down on the soft comforter of the double sized bed.

She started to undo her jeans, but he stopped her, brushing her hands aside as he took over. She kept her eyes on his, watching the color of his green eyes deepen to an almost forest color. He slid the jeans down her legs, leaving her in just her lacy panties and those eyes of his took on a more jeweled tone, glittering with excitement as he gazed at her. He made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the world. Not like a weirdo or an outcast. She could see that he wanted her as much as she wanted him.

He moved over her, and as she reached for him, he took her hands in his and drew them up above her head and pressed her fingers to the iron bars of the bedframe. "Hold them here," he murmured.

Cassandra drew in a shaky breath as heat pooled between her legs. She nodded, her breath coming in short little gasps as his lips feathered over her body, going from her neck down her breasts, over her stomach to the edge of her panties. She squirmed beneath him, but his hands moved to her hips and held her in place as his tongue traced the edge of the lace.

"Nadarr," she gasped.

He chuckled as he gripped the lace with his teeth and drew them down her body. "So damn beautiful," he said, his voice husky as his warm breath sent a shiver over her stomach. He spread her legs a little wider and then lifted her hips and licked her seam. "Delicious," he moaned before going back for more.

Cassandra bucked in his hands, but he gripped her ass a little tighter and she crested the orgasm, quivering against his mouth as she screamed her pleasure. "Nadarr!"

Nadarr set her back on the bed and stood up, sliding his jeans and boxers off his hips, then returned to her. He leaned down and kissed her, and she took her hands from the bars and wrapped them around his neck, drawing him closer. His cock pressed into her sex, and she nearly came just from the contact she was so sensitive. Smiling, he pulled back just a little and adjusted his cock to her entrance and then in one swift movement, plunged into her.

Together they found a rhythm and soon they were both riding the high of an orgasm that left them spent and snuggling into one another. Nadarr drew her close, kissing her forehead. Cassie had never felt so loved, so complete as she did in that moment. She'd had sex before, of course, but it had never been like this. This was next level, as if Nadarr had been made just for her.

"That was amazing," he murmured. "When can we do that again?"

Cassandra giggled. "I've got all night."

He leaned over and kissed her again, gently at first and then more passionately and soon they were making love again. They finally fell asleep in the early hours of the morning.

Blinking awake, something felt different, and Cassandra turned her head on the pillow to see Nadarr's long blond hair on the pillow next to hers. She pushed up on her elbow and leaned toward him, kissing his bare shoulder. He rolled to his back and smiled as he came awake.

"Good morning, Cassie," he murmured. He opened his eyes, and his smile grew. "You look beautiful."

Laughing, Cassie shook her head. "I'm sure I don't." She pushed at her hair which she was sure was a tangled mess.

"You're gorgeous."

She grinned and sat all the way up, the sheets dropping to her waist. "How about we shower and then have some breakfast?"

His eyebrows rose and he gave her a sexy look. "Together?"

Cassie bit her lip and then nodded.

He hopped out of bed, scooped her up and carried her into the bathroom, setting her down on the counter as he turned on the water. They spent another forty-five minutes in the shower getting dirty and then washing each other off before dressing and heading to the kitchen.

Cassandra had never felt more alive, or more sore. After ice skating for hours, making love all night and again this morning, she couldn't help but wonder how she was still standing! Still, it was a wonderful feeling, and she was excited to see what the day would bring.

"Cassie," Nadarr said softly as they sat together at the breakfast counter in her kitchen.

"Yes?"

"Will you marry me?"

"I…" Cassandra felt overwhelmed, but extremely happy being with him. She couldn't imagine not being with him, but she knew that meant leaving her home, heck it meant leaving the planet! "I want to, but… it's more than just marrying you, Nadarr, it's also leaving my home and I have to admit that's a bit scary. I've never been anywhere, not really."

"I know it's a lot, but we are meant to be together, Cassie. Please say yes."

"Can I take some time to get used to the idea before I say yes?" she asked, worried that he needed an answer right away. "You aren't leaving are you?"

He smiled. "Yes, you can have some more time, and no I'm not leaving yet. I'm just hoping by your words you are leaning toward saying yes."

Cassandra giggled in her relief. "I am definitely leaning toward yes, but leaving my home, let alone my planet, forever is scary."

He took her hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it. "I understand. And it wouldn't be forever, not really, we could come back for visits, pick up supplies for you to keep baking if you want. I know my people would be thrilled to try the treats you create."

Blushing, Cassandra smiled. "We could do that?"

"Of course. And we could visit other areas of your planet too, I've heard you have some exciting locales on your planet. We have several on ours as well."

They spoke for a while longer, as they cleaned up their breakfast dishes and Cassandra had to be happy about the fact that he actually enjoyed helping her cook and clean up. She didn't want to marry someone who would treat her like a servant. Once they finished, they left the bakery and headed back to the bed and breakfast.

"There she is! Sheriff, arrest her!"

Cassandra blinked and stepped closer to Nadarr. They had just come through the doors of the bed and breakfast to find a crowd of townspeople gathered in the dining room. "What?"

"Now, now, sir, she obviously didn't kidnap Princess Gelissia, not if she's here now with Prince Nadarr."

"It's Reverend and you know it! And I demand you arrest her! We all saw her dragging the female alien into the woods!"

Nadarr stopped. "Where is my sister!" he demanded of the crowd.

CHAPTER 13

NADARR

The walk back to the bed and breakfast was nice. He loved the way Cassie's smaller hand felt in his own. He couldn't wait to tell his sister about their date and his night with Cassie, not all the details of course, but he wanted to share his euphoria with her of the fact that Cassie was definitely meant to be his mate. They were perfect for each other in every way.

They headed through the front door of the bed and breakfast and could hear a commotion in the dining room. Lots of chattering and excited voices.

"What's going on, do you think?" Cassie asked, sounding curious.

"I don't know, it's never been this noisy here. Let's go see what's going on."

They walked toward the dining room and as soon as they made the open doorway, a man's voice said, "There she is! Sheriff, arrest her!"

Cassandra stopped walking next to him and he stopped with her, startled.

"What?" Cassie gasped.

"Now, now, sir, she obviously didn't kidnap Princess Gelissia, not if she's here now with Prince Nadarr." The sheriff's deep voice was meant to be calming, but Nadarr didn't think it really had much effect on the gathered people.

"It's Reverend and you know it! And I demand you arrest her! We all saw her dragging the female alien into the woods!"

Nadarr felt as though his world had dropped out from under him at the Reverend's words. A red film flashed over his vision, and he was ready to tear them all limb from limb. "Where is my sister!" he demanded with a snarl.

The man in uniform moved between him and the crowd. "Prince Nadarr, could you please come with me and check your room?" Sheriff Katz asked.

Nadarr swallowed down his anger and tried to remain calm. Surely these people were wrong. His sister wasn't missing. He'd know if she'd been hurt, wouldn't he? He blew out a breath and nodded. He needed to get a handle on what was actually happening. "Yes, yes, but what is going on? Where is Gelissia?" Nadarr turned and led the way to the room he was sharing with his sister, his hand still

laced with Cassie's. He liked how warm and reassuring her hand felt in his hand.

"According to Mrs. Freeman, Cassandra drugged her and carried her off to the woods."

The entire thought was absurd. "I'm not sure what these people have against Cassie, but she's been with me since yesterday morning, she couldn't have done anything." Nadarr gritted his teeth. He hoped Gelissia was just hanging out in their room watching tv. He opened the door, and called out, "Lissi?"

He dropped Cassie's hand to search, but after checking every corner of the room and the bathroom, he found it empty. He'd even checked under the beds, just to be sure she wasn't messing with him.

"Did she take anything with her? Any indication that she went somewhere on her own?" the sheriff asked.

"Her backpack is still here, and so is her coat. Nadarr, I don't think she would have left without her coat. Not on her own," Cassie said, her voice filled with fear. "What if someone did take her? Who would do that?"

"I'll go watch the security tapes, see if I can pick up anything." The sheriff walked out of the door and left them alone in the room.

Nadarr, feeling panicked, searched the room again and then as he sat down on Gelissia's bed, he noticed a small, folded paper on the pillow that he hadn't noticed before. He should have been here, he thought as he picked it up. He should have protected her. And how could they have said Cassie was the one to take her? She couldn't have, could she? She was with him the whole time, wasn't she? He frowned as he opened the paper, but then he couldn't believe what he was reading and had to read it three more times just to understand what it was saying.

Prince Nadarr,

If you ever want to see your sister again, come to the Old Mill at the far end of town past the ice rink. Come alone.

Cassandra Moon

Nadarr felt as if someone had just punched him in the gut. He didn't know what kind of game Cassandra was playing, but it wasn't funny. He looked over at her and snarled, "What the hell is this, Cassandra?"

Cassandra looked startled by his tone, and then her eyes teared up. "What? I don't know what you're talking about, Nadarr?"

"This!" He tossed the note at her. "What the hell is this? Why would you do this?"

Shaking her head, she stared at him as the note floated to her feet. "I… I don't understand, I didn't … what does it say?" she asked, her voice quavering as she bent down to pick it up. She read the note and gasped. "I… Nadarr, I didn't write this… I swear this isn't even my handwriting!" She bit her lip and tears spilled down her cheeks as she wrapped her arms around her waist, as if trying to hold herself together. "Maybe it was them, the parishioners, and Reverend Brown… maybe they did this."

"Why would they do it?" Nadarr glared at her. He couldn't believe that she had done it, but the town people seemed so sure it was her and then there was this note…

"Don't go, Nadarr, I … I don't know what's going on, but it has to be a trap and I'm scared."

If it wasn't her, it probably was a trap, but he couldn't be absolutely sure that she didn't do it. Maybe she had done it while he'd been sleeping. He'd never forgive her if she caused harm to his sister.

CHAPTER 14

CASSANDRA

Cassandra stared at the note with her name on it. How could Nadarr believe she'd do something like this? Ten minutes ago they'd been talking about getting married, but now… now he believed she was capable of something so awful! How could she consider marrying someone who would think something like that? She grabbed hold of her crystal to try and calm herself, to wipe out the negative thoughts, but it wasn't working at the moment.

She stared at him as he glared at her, feeling worse than she'd ever felt in her life. Worse than when the parishioners yelled at her and harassed her. Worse than she felt when her parents died so unexpectedly. Worse than when her grandparents died too. She'd felt miserable then, sure, but this was completely different. Her heart was breaking, shattering in slow motion as the seconds ticked by. She couldn't breathe, couldn't move, couldn't do anything but feel every tiny little piece of her heart break off as it exploded in pain. She wanted to run, to leave, and never look back, but just as she was about to turn and walk out the door, the sheriff appeared.

He strode through the door, a disc in his hand. "Ms. Moon, you're going to have to come with me."

"What? Why?" Cassandra asked, gasping as if she'd been sucker punched for the third time.

Nadarr stood up and walked over to the sheriff. "What is that?"

"This is the security camera footage." He held it up, walked over to the tv and slid it into the room's dvd player. He queued it up and hit play.

Cassandra's eyes widened as she stared at the tv screen. "But… that's not me!" She couldn't understand what she was watching because the woman on the screen clearly was her, but it couldn't be because she hadn't done what the woman on the camera was doing.

The sheriff grabbed her wrist and twisted it behind her back, locking her wrist into a handcuff and then doing the same to her other wrist. "It clearly shows it is you."

"How could you do this! Where is my sister!" Nadarr demanded.

"I didn't take her, Nadarr! I know it looks like me on there, but that's not me! I was with you!"

"Obviously you weren't!" he snarled. "You even looked right at the camera!"

Cassandra burst into tears and started shaking. She hadn't hurt Gelissia, she hadn't hurt anyone, and she never would, but Nadarr wasn't listening. Maybe she was going crazy, maybe they all were. "I didn't!" she sobbed.

"Come with me, Ms. Moon." The sheriff gripped her bicep and started toward the door.

"Sheriff, I know this is not how you usually handle things, but would you mind if I detained Ms. Moon? She has my sister, a Princess of Trilyn. I want her back."

Sheriff Katz stopped and frowned at Nadarr. "I can't allow you to take her and torture h—"

"I assure you I won't torture her, Sheriff, you have my word as a Trilyn Prince. I merely wish to hold her until she tells me where my sister is, and then I will release her and leave the planet with my sister. I don't wish to stay here where the women of the planet are so conniving that they'd do something like this."

Cassandra sobbed harder hearing his words. She would never do anything to hurt him or his sister. She felt betrayal in her heart and was dying a million little deaths with every word he spoke. Her throat tightened and she couldn't even defend herself, couldn't reach for her crystal to calm herself, all she could do was cry.

"Very well, but I will be by to check on her and make sure you are not treating her badly."

"As you wish. I will be taking her to my ship, it is about an hour north of here."

"Nadarr," Cassandra managed to get out. "I didn't do this." Her words were barely audible.

"I don't want to hear it. I trusted you." He took her arm and shoved her out of the door.

Cassandra stumbled as he marched her down the hallway toward the bed and breakfast front door. "I can't… slow down… please, Nadarr," she gasped out through her tears. She slammed into a wall as she stumbled again. She couldn't even break her fall with her hands cuffed behind her back.

"Prince Nadarr, if I'm not taking her to the station, I'll need to take my handcuffs back."

Nadarr paused and then nodded. "Fine."

Cassandra stared at him through her tears. She couldn't believe this was happening. She had been falling in love with him and now… now she had to wonder what or was it who was so set on ruining her life that they would do this. She understood his anger and his belief that she had done all this. She'd seen the video evidence, seen the note, she wouldn't believe her either, but she really hadn't done it. She couldn't have, as she knew she'd been asleep in the bed pressed up next to Nadarr. But he'd been pretty out of it, so maybe he really did think she had crept from the bed, gone into town and attacked his sister. The thought of that made her start sobbing again.

The sheriff removed the cuffs, and she rubbed her wrists. Nadarr grabbed her arm again and began dragging her once more out of the building. Out on the street, a posse of parishioners led by Reverend Brown followed them jeering at her as they headed toward the woods.

"Lock her away!" one of them called.

"String her up!" another called out.

"Burn the witch at the stake!" a third voice shouted.

Nadarr thankfully ignored them.

At least she hoped he was ignoring them. She tried to catch her breath and will herself to stop crying, despite her heart aching like it had been pierced with thousands and thousands of tiny knives. This was a slow death and she almost wished that he would just put her out of her misery, but then that wouldn't save Gelissia and there was the fact that she would be dead, and she really didn't want that. She wanted the happiness she felt just hours before back. Hell, at this point she'd settle for the comfortably numb feeling she'd felt before Nadarr had shown up in her life, since it was quite apparent that she'd never get that unbridled happiness back. How could she when Nadarr clearly didn't love her or want to marry her anymore.

He didn't say a word as he marched her past her bakery and deeper into the woods. Finally they arrived at what could only be a spaceship. It was quite large but not as big as some of the others appeared on the tv screen, some of those were the size of a football field. This one was maybe the size of a small house. Nadarr pressed his hand to some panel and a door opened, then a ramp slid down to the ground. He yanked on her arm and tugged her up the ramp into the ship.

This was not how Cassandra wanted to see his ship, not as a prisoner, but now she had no other choice.

CHAPTER 15

NADARR

"Nadarr, I didn't do this." Cassandra looked devastated, as if he was the one betraying her.

His heart ached. He wanted to believe her, but the video clearly showed her face. "I don't want to hear it. I trusted you." He took her arm and shoved her out of the door, but he didn't want to hurt her, so he made sure to hold on to her so she wouldn't fall.

He took the lead down the hallway, gripping her arm as they walked, but his strides were long in his anger, and she stumbled.

"I can't… slow down… please, Nadarr." Cassandra's words were soft and hesitant through her tears.

He felt his grip slipping and she stumbled into the wall. He wanted to be concerned but he was still too upset to say anything, despite the fact that his eyes trailed over her, looking for injuries.

The sheriff approached them from behind. "Prince Nadarr, if I'm not taking her to the station, I'll need to take my handcuffs back."

Nadarr didn't really need her handcuffed, she wasn't attempting to get away from him and he didn't think she would. In his heart, he couldn't really reconcile what he saw on that video with the woman before him. The woman on the screen had been almost mechanical, very unlike the Cassandra he knew. It just didn't make sense. What was her end game? Why would she do this? He just couldn't understand it. "Fine."

The sheriff removed the cuffs, and she looked down as she rubbed her wrists.

Nadarr was torn between wanting to comfort her and shaking her to get her to tell him where she'd taken his sister. He just couldn't get over seeing her sneer at the camera as if daring him to do something about it. He grabbed her wrist a bit more harshly than he'd intended and began dragging her through the front hall to the door. As they passed through onto the steps, he noticed Reverend Brown and his parishioners following behind them.

He headed for the woods, but he could hear them shouting behind him.

"Lock her away!" one of the parishioners called.

"String her up!" another voice shouted.

"Burn the witch at the stake!" came the next shout.

Nadarr could not believe the way they were acting. He would never hurt her, but he would detain her. He worried about her safety after he left the planet, but he didn't want to be worried about her. His feelings were all conflicted in his heart because of what she'd done. How could she be so cold? How could this teary, kind, softhearted woman be the same calculating woman in that video? It didn't make sense.

After walking for longer than he recalled walking to get here on that first day, he finally saw the ship in the distance and sighed with relief. He'd half feared that he'd get lost on the way there, but now he relaxed just a little bit. His sense of direction hadn't gotten in his way. He pressed his hand to the scanner and the door opened. A moment later the boarding ramp descended. Gripping Cassandra's arm firmly, he marched her up the ramp and onto the ship. The door slid closed behind him.

He led her to the room he had claimed as his and let her go. "Stay here." He turned and walked out, putting his hand on the scanner next to the bedroom and closed the door. It was programed to read his DNA and wouldn't respond to her anyway.

With her effectively locked in the bedroom, he went to the armory and picked up a couple of weapons, a dagger and a small blaster. He didn't keep many onboard, they were really only for emergency use, but if this wasn't an emergency, he didn't know what was. Still, he didn't want to start an intergalactic incident by harming a citizen of Earth.

His mind turned to the reason he'd even come here to Earth, to find a bride, someone to love. He hadn't expected to run into trouble. Hadn't expected the woman he was falling in love with to betray him and his people. How could he trust the scanner or his heart now? The scanner had matched him definitively with Cassandra and his heart had agreed. But they'd both been wrong apparently, because that was her face on the video surveillance, drugging a surprised Gelissia and dragging her out of the bed and breakfast.

He slammed the locker shut and then punched it. He'd never been a violent man, but he was very angry and didn't trust himself not to bring harm to whoever took his twin. Unfortunately it was looking like that someone was Cassie, and it was tearing him up that she was behind it all. He would have sworn on his life that she was kind and gentle, loving and sweet.

"Get it together, Nadarr," he told himself harshly.

Checking to be sure he had everything, he returned to the bedroom and opened the door to find Cassandra curled up on the bed, her cheeks tear-stained as she softly cried.

His heart ached even more seeing her like that but whatever was going on with her, he had to steel his heart against her. He couldn't trust her. He stood there for a moment, just looking at her, but he needed answers. Answers she apparently had. "Is my sister at that mill?" he asked, his voice harsh as the images from that video played through his mind.

She sniffled and sat up. "I don't know. Don't go there, Nadarr. I didn't do this, but whoever did… I'm afraid they'll hurt you." Her voice was soft, desperate.

He couldn't let her breakthrough the steel barrier he'd just wrapped his heart in, but at the moment that steel barrier felt more like a vice. "You already have." He shook his head and his hands clenched into fists as he fought against his feelings for her. "I won't lock you in this room, but I am locking you in the ship. There is food in the kitchen and a bathroom next to this one. Once I recover my sister, I will let you go, and we will go back to Trilyn."

"Nadarr." She looked at him, her lips quivering and tears sliding down her cheeks. "Please be careful." She looked as though she wanted to add more, but she stayed silent.

Nadarr frowned as he looked at her. His thoughts troubled him. He still couldn't understand how she could have done this, but he didn't have time to figure her out right now. His sister needed him. He turned and left her sitting there on his bed. The bed he'd imagined making love to her in just hours before. Now that would never happen. Sighing, he left the ship, and headed back to Forest Bend.

He walked and walked, and realized he'd taken a wrong turn as nothing looked familiar in the woods and there were certain trees on the regular path that he'd made a note off before. He turned back and retraced his snowy footprints. He found the right path ten minutes later, then continued until he saw the bakery. See it gave him mixed feelings of joy and sadness. He didn't want to believe what he'd seen with his own eyes. That Cassandra had stabbed his sister with some kind of needle and dragged her out of the bed and breakfast by her hair out of the back door. He never in a millennium would have imagined she was capable of doing something like that.

Shaking his head, he journeyed on to the edge of town and then through its center. As he passed through, the parishioners began to follow him again. "Go away," he muttered through gritted teeth. It was bad enough he was feeling awful about locking Cassandra up, but to hear them disparage her was like nails piercing his skin. He hated it, hated hearing their nasty comments.

"We don't take kindly to witches kidnapping people," the Reverend said as he began to march at his side.

"She's not a witch," he murmured, defending her, despite the fact that he'd seen her kidnapping his twin with his own eyes.

"But she is a kidnapper," the man sneered.

Nadarr stopped in a huff. He knew what that video showed, but even though it looked like her, he still didn't one hundred percent believe it. Not in his heart. His mind told him not to be ridiculous, of course it was her, he'd seen her. He knew her face intimately and that was her. He ran a hand over his face and through his hair as he pressed his lips together before saying, "Look, I don't know what she is, but I'm going to get my sister back and then I'm leaving. I don't need your help." He turned back toward the ice rink and started forward again.

"Maybe you do, maybe you don't, but we'll be going with you whether you like it or not. This is our town, and we will make sure it is safe for all of us," Reverend Brown said as he stepped forward.

Sighing, Nadarr continued on down the sidewalk, doing his best to ignore them as they chanted, 'Death to the witch' and quoted scripture that said, 'thou shall not suffer a witch to live'. It turned his stomach at how these people could act toward another sentient being. He could not wait to get off of this planet. They walked on past the ice rink, and he could finally see the mill. It was an older looking

structure, with worn wood and warped boards. He figured with Cassandra locked up in the ship, this would be just a recovery mission, so when he reached the building, he didn't really take any precautions as he opened the door to the old mill.

"Lissi?" he called into the dusty darkness, hoping to hear her.

As he and the Reverend came through the door, there was a loud bang and the wood above his head splintered with a loud 'thunk'.

"What in all the heavens—"

"Get down!" The Reverend grabbed his arm and dragged him to the ground as another loud bang sounded.

One of the parishioners behind him screamed, "I'm hit!"

"The witch shot Brian!"

Nadarr frowned. Cassandra couldn't have shot him; she was locked up. Did she have an accomplice? Was that who was shooting at them?

"We better get out of here and get Brian to the hospital," the Reverend suggested as another pair of bullets hit the ground in front of them.

Nadarr nodded. He couldn't see Gelissia anywhere and had an ex-lover to confront now. How could she have sat there and knowingly allowed him to walk in on that? He frowned as he recalled her telling him not to go, and to be careful… he couldn't understand it, couldn't understand her. Nothing made any sense.

And where was Gelissia? he wondered as they made a hasty retreat from the mill.

CHAPTER 16

CASSANDRA

As soon as she heard the outer door snick shut, Cassandra sat up and wiped her face. Tears weren't going to get her anywhere and certainly weren't going to prove her innocence. She wanted to hate Nadarr for believe that she would ever do something like this, but clearly someone had gone to a lot of trouble to frame her, and she couldn't actually blame him for believing she'd done it.

Now she just had to get free of the ship, follow him, and figure out how to save him and rescue Gelissia, because she didn't want to just sit around here waiting for him to find his sister and then leave her. She needed to be proactive. Hopping up from the bed, she went to the door they'd come through and tried to open it as he had on the other side, but no matter where she pressed her hand, the door stayed closed. She banged on it, tried to lift it, but it wasn't budging.

"Damn it." She smacked the door one more time.

Obviously, Nadarr had known what he was doing by locking her in here. She walked over to what looked like a control panel, but she was afraid of pushing any of the buttons. What if one of them sent her up to outer space? That wouldn't be good. Sighing, she sat down in one of the chairs and looked around the room. There wasn't much in here aside from the control panel and chairs and a wide screen.

She pushed herself back up and started exploring the rest of the ship. She found the kitchen, if you could call it that. It only had a sink and a couple of cabinets, a counter and — after opening it, she realized — a refrigerator. From there she moved on, found a room with more feminine clothing that must have been Gelissia's room. She backed out without messing anything up.

She returned to the room Nadarr had put her in and began looking around. On the table next to the bed, she noticed a book, so she picked it up only to find that it was a journal, not a regular book. She sat down and looked at what he'd written. She turned to the last entry and began to read.

This trip has me nervous. What if I don't find her? My compatible mate? The one meant for me? Gelissia would love that. For it to be just the two of us until the end of time, but my heart longs to find a wife. Someone for me to love and be loved by. Someone beautiful and kind and gentle.

Gelissia would make fun of me if I were to tell her of all the things I long to do. She has always been the stronger of the two of us. The protector. For once, I want to be the one doing the

protecting. To be the one someone looks to for the answers. I want someone who will love me.

Maybe Earth holds the woman of my dreams. Maybe she's down there waiting for me to come find her. Waiting for me to love and protect her.

Is there such a woman? Floran believes I will find the one woman meant to be mine on Earth, but then he did find his wife there. Will they be friends? Will she want to move to Trilyn with me, or will she be like the other wives and wish to spend a great deal of time on Earth?

Floran says Earth is almost primitive in comparison to Trilyn, but his wife seems normal, smart, beautiful, loving, not like some troglodyte barely able to speak. I've seen a few movies from the planet, they seem like fine people, though some might be a little messed up in the head if you go by what that Julia Morse managed to do. I'm glad she's no longer alive to cause such trouble.

Probably why Floran deemed it a good time for me to come find my bride. It would be safer than when he was there. Of course, having Gelissia here does make it a bit less lonely, though I'd never tell her that. She's already trying to take over things. I don't want her choosing my bride, I'd end up with someone like her and as much as I love her, I don't want a woman like her as my wife.

I need someone softer, someone who doesn't see me as incapable. Someone lovely. A true love.

Cassandra stopped reading, feeling like she was invading his privacy. She wished with all of her heart that this whole thing with Gelissia hadn't happened. That she and Nadarr were still at her apartment wrapped in each other's arms. Sighing, she put the book back where she found it. She got up and started looking around the room again, this time taking in the pictures on the wall. They showed a younger Nadarr and Gelissia as well as another, older boy. That must be Prince Floran, she thought.

The outer door snicked open, and she whirled around to see an angry Nadarr standing in the doorway. "Who are you working with? Where is Gelissia?" he demanded.

Cassandra sighed and shook her head. "I'm not working with anyone, Nadarr. I didn't take Gelissia, I promise." She was done with tears and realized she needed to defend herself and make him realize she wasn't his enemy and if he'd let her, she could be the woman he was looking for. Her heart ached to go back in time to before all of this started. To return to her little apartment with him and be wrapped in his arms. "The writing on that note wasn't mine. And the parishioner's hate me, any one of them could be behind this, trying to ruin my happiness. Or—" it just occurred to her that there was someone else interested in the twins, "maybe it was that reporter! She had light blonde hair like mine… Selene! That was her name."

His brow furrowed and he frowned at her. He pulled the note from his pocket and stared at it. "It does look a little different."

"I can prove it, let me write it out and you can compare, I promise it's not my writing, Nadarr," she assured him, hoping he would finally start listening to her.

CHAPTER 17

NADARR

Cassandra was very convincing that she hadn't been the one to write the note and take Gelissia, but that video really bothered him. It had been her face on that camera. Nadarr glanced down at the note again. The writing was pretty different from what he'd seen of hers, he didn't need her to write out anything for him to know that. He was just afraid that she'd disguised her handwriting for some reason, and this was meant to misdirect him again.

His heart told him that she was telling the truth, but his brain said not to trust her, not to trust anyone. Someone had taken Gelissia and shot at him. Was it some other person behind it all, or was it Cassandra and an accomplice? He just couldn't be sure. He needed advice and the only person he could really think of who might be able to help was Floran.

"Please, Nadarr, let me show you I didn't do this, please?"

Nadarr glanced at her and shook his head. "No. You don't have to do that. I can tell it's not your normal handwriting. I just don't know, Cassie. That was your face on that video. If it wasn't you…" he paused not knowing what else to say and frowned.

Cassandra sank to the bed and sighed. "I know. I saw the video. I don't know who that was, or how they managed to look like me, but it wasn't *me*, I would never hurt you or Gelissia. Not ever."

Nadarr desperately wanted to believe her. "Look, I need to call my brother, so could you stay in here?"

Her brow furrowed, but she nodded. "Alright, if that is what you wish." She scooted back on the bed and laid down.

Nadarr turned and went back to the control room. He sat down in a chair and began pushing the necessary buttons to call Floran. He waited as the call connected and then saw Floran on the screen.

"Nadarr, where is Gelissia? Is she not with you?"

He shook his head. "No, Floran, that's why I'm call—"

"Have you seen the news? About the Morse Cooperation? Those boxes that have been busted open across the country?" Floran seemed a bit worried as he spoke.

"Well, yes, but what does that—"

"I'm going to patch Agent David Davon into the call, he can explain it all better, just one minute, Nadarr. Really with Gelissia was there with you, she's had training for this sort of thing. Where is she anyway?" Floran asked, distractedly as he pushed things on his own control panel.

"That's why I called, she's been—"

"Hold that thought, Nadarr," Floran held up a finger and Agent David Davon appeared on the screen.

"Agent Davon; how can I be of help, Prince Floran?" the dark haired man with a mustache asked.

"Good afternoon, Agent Davon, I've patched you into my call with my brother Nadarr, he's currently on Earth, in Madison, Wisconsin I believe."

"Forest Bend, actually," Nadarr put in.

"Forest Bend? Oh yes, that is one of the places reporting a disturbed Morse Corporation package." Agent Davon nodded.

"They have one of these things there? Damn. I was really hoping Nadarr would have an easier time than I did. I thought we were done with this since Julia is dead."

Agent Davon sighed. "You and me both, Prince Floran. Have you told your brother the details of what to expect?"

"No, that's why I patched you in. I thought you could explain better than I could. You're the one who's seen this thing in action."

"Right," Agent Davon agreed. "Prince Nadarr, I'm sorry to be meeting you under such circumstances. Have you had any contact with a person acting strangely? Maybe attacking you?"

"Yes! That is why I called Floran in the first place! The woman I am in love with drugged and kidnapped Gelissia, she's missing! I have her locked up here on the ship, but she keeps saying it's not her. Is this package causing her to do things without her not being aware of it?"

"No, no, she isn't doing this at all, it's what came out of that package. I believe it's some sort of android that can alter its appearance to look like someone close to you. In your case, I'm guessing it's the woman you mentioned. You said that your sister has gone missing? Drugged and kidnapped?"

Nadarr's mind reeled with what Agent Davon was saying. Cassandra didn't do this, she was telling the truth. His heart swelled and then dropped into the pit of his stomach. He'd accused her of doing this heinous act. He hadn't trusted her, hadn't trusted their connection to each other. He'd spent all day and night with her, and knew she couldn't have done it, but then that note, and video popped up and he couldn't trust his own thoughts and feelings. He had thought he had to have been wrong about her. Now he had some major apologizing to do.

"Prince Nadarr?"

"Hmmm?"

"Your sister?"

"What? Oh, yes! Gelissia has been drugged and kidnapped by someone who looked like Cassandra. The people here hate her, claim she's a witch and want to kill her, well, they want me to, but I'm in love with her—"

His brother grinned. "So you found her even though you crashed? That's fantastic, brother! I look forward to meeting her. Now about Gelissia, what can I do to help?"

"You've already helped more than you know, Floran. You too, Agent Davon, thank you. I have to go, I have some apologizing to do." Nadarr started to end the call, but Agent Davon called out to him.

"Wait!"

"Yes, Agent Davon?"

"The android is probably very dangerous. It is programed to take out anyone with Trilyn DNA. We've already had several Trilyn nationals injured, no deaths yet, thankfully, but several have been severely injured. Be very careful engaging the android, Prince Nadarr. And if you need my, here is my direct line. Call me any time if you need help."

"Thank you, Agent Davon. I will." Nodding, Nadarr disconnected the call.

Taking a deep breath he headed back to his room. Stepping up to the door, he looked in to see Cassandra asleep on the bed. He'd been so horrible to her, and she'd been so hurt… he just hoped he could make it up to her. He felt awful for how he'd acted. For the words those parishioners had called out and he'd said nothing. He hadn't defended her, hadn't protected her, hadn't treated her well. He didn't deserve her forgiveness, her kindness, her love.

He quietly walked over to the bed and sat down on the edge next to her. He laid a hand on her back and then gently stroked her hair back from her face. He could still make out the tearstained tracks on her cheeks. He hated himself for causing those tears and he'd never forgive himself, even if he was lucky enough for her to forgive him.

Cassandra began to stir, her brow furrowing as her breathing changed and then she blinked her pretty eyes open and looked up at him, a small smile forming on her lips, but then it was replaced with a sadder expression.

"Cassie, I'm sorry."

She looked at him with a troubled and confused expression.

"It wasn't you, you didn't do this, and I should have known it wasn't you. I am so sorry that I caused you to feel an ounce of pain and hurt, I didn't … no, I did at the time, but I am so full of regret for the way I spoke to you and treated you. I know I can't expect you to accept my apology, let alone my love, but you have both." Nadarr stood and with a sad look, he turned to leave, having said what he needed to and not expecting her to forgive him.

He was almost to the door when she said, "Nadarr, I don't blame you. I would have thought the same after seeing that video." She got up and walked over to him. "Yes, your words hurt me. Not trusting me hurt me, but we've only known each other a handful of days and it is your twin missing, so I can take that into account and excuse it." She laid a hand on his arm. "I hurt me because I've grown to care

for you deeply over the last few days. We have a connection that I can't deny, and before we found out your sister was missing, I was prepared to say yes to your proposal. I don't know if I can say yes right now, but we can work on that after we find Gelissia."

"You'll still consider marrying me? After I treated you so horribly?"

"At the moment, I am prepared to chalk it up to extenuating circumstances beyond your control. However, I now want to take a little more time to consider where we go from here. My feelings for you are still there, but they're bruised. I'm going to need a little time to think on it. Okay?"

"I will never forgive myself, Cassie. I swear to you, I will never doubt you again. I will never break your trust in my again." Nadarr traced her hairline and then cupped her cheek. "May I kiss you?"

Cassandra smiled. "Yes, please." She slid her arms up his chest and locked them around his neck.

Nadarr pulled her closer and kissed her, pouring all of his feelings into the kiss. Showing her how sorry he was, how much he desperately needed her and her kindness, her faith and trust in him. How he didn't deserve it but needed it. And then, as if a switch was flicked, the kiss turned more passionate, and they were both devouring each other's lips, desperate for closeness.

Cassandra's hands slid back down his chest, tugging on his shirt, lifting it. Her fingers smoothed over his chest and lit a fire in his veins. He allowed her to pull the shirt over his head, and he lifted her up in his arms, still kissing her. He wanted her, but he wasn't going to push his luck. He would let her decide where this was going.

"Nadarr, make love to me," she murmured between kisses.

He pulled back, unsure. "Cassie, I want to, believe me, I want you more than anything, but are you sure?"

She grinned. "I've heard make-up sex can be very healing and incredible."

Chuckling, Nadarr turned and brought her back over to the bed. He'd imagined her here for days. Heck before he'd even met her, he'd imagined bringing the woman he loved here. Cassie was it for him. If she chose to turn him down, he'd at least have the memories of her, because there would never be anyone else for him.

He quickly undressed and she did the same and then she took control, pushing him back down on the bed and straddling his waist. She leaned down over him, teasing him by allowing her nice, rounded breast to brush against his chest as her sweet pussy did the same to his throbbing cock. And then, in one swift motion, she impaled herself upon him. He thrust up as their hips rocked together. He skimmed his hands over her curves, loving the feel of her.

He couldn't wait to have her always in his life, if she chose to come with him. He wouldn't press her, but in his heart, she was already his. His fingers slid over her ass and squeezed as they both came, screaming each other's names. Cassandra collapsed on his chest, and he held her close. He kissed her forehead and pulled her even tighter to him. He never wanted to let her go. Cassie pushed up a little and looked him full in the face. She was smiling, so that gave him hope.

"Now, we need to talk about what you've been doing since you locked me up in this ship."

CHAPTER 18

CASSANDRA

Waking up to Nadarr sitting next to her was nice, hearing him apologize was healing. She had not imagined that happening no matter what scenario played through her mind. She hadn't given in to the hope that he would finally realize she wasn't behind Gelissia's kidnapping. So waking up to him doing exactly that relieved a great deal of her anxiety.

She wasn't sure what she wanted to do anymore though, in regard to his proposal. She knew they needed to have trust between them, and they didn't have that. It had been too soon for them to actually build it up. His words had a soothing and healing effect on her soul, and she wanted nothing more than to be truly close to him. She wanted to get their relationship back on track. Not ignore what he'd done, how he'd treated her, but to heal that and forgive him. Which is why she asked him to make love to her.

If they were going to marry, they needed to heal, and she needed to forgive him with her whole heart and not hold onto any resentment. She needed to be close to him, to feel his love flow through her, around her. In her path to self-discovery, while working with crystals and tarot and astrology, she had learned that holding on to hurt, resentment, all of that, it only led to more misery and suffering on her part. To be at peace she needed to accept what happened, forgive and let it go. She didn't have to forget, but she couldn't be vindictive or hold it against him now or in the future. She had to put out into the world what she wanted to get back. Karma was a real thing. And it would come back and bite her ass if she went down the path of darkness.

After making love to him, she felt at peace and calm enough to make thought out, rational decisions because she really had forgiven him. She knew it had only been a handful of days, but she was seriously falling hard for him and had seen by his actions that he really was a caring man, that his harsh words had been from hurt and his belief that she'd betrayed his trust and hurt his twin. He'd realized his mistake and apologized. Taken responsibility for hurting her feelings and breaking her trust in him. It was an honorable thing to do and her respect and love for him grew.

She still wasn't sure what made him realize that he'd made a mistake, but she was determined to figure that out. So, with a smile, she said, "Now, we need to talk about what you've been doing since you locked me up in this ship."

Nadarr sighed. "I went to the mill to look for Gelissia."

"I told you not to go there, what if whoever took Gelissia was ready to do the same to you!" Cassandra pushed herself up on his chest and started looking him over for injuries. "Are you okay? Obviously you didn't find her, but… I'm not seeing any new injuries. Are you sure you're okay?"

He smiled and nodded. "I'm fine, no thanks to whoever took her. They shot at me but missed. They did hit one of Reverend Brown's people though."

"What? Who?"

Nadarr frowned. "A man named Brian?"

Cassandra frowned. The only Brian she could recall was a heavy set, balding man who ran the local hardware store. He was one of the men who constantly harassed her, but as far as she could tell, he was all big talk and would back down when he was on his own. Taking a breath, she gripped her crystal and sent healing thoughts to the man who disliked her. He might not deserve it, but he also didn't deserve to be shot. She hoped he recovered quickly. "Is he okay?"

"I believe so, they took him to the hospital."

"So you didn't find Gelissia at the mill?"

"No, I didn't see her if she was there." Nadarr sighed.

"I can't believe you took them as backup." Cassandra rolled her eyes.

"I didn't," he shook his head, "they wouldn't take no for an answer, said it was their town and they needed to protect it."

"Idiots, the lot of them." She sighed and then said, "I'm glad you weren't hurt."

"Me too. I should have listened to you." He winced and then looked back at her. "I spoke to my brother and an Agent David Davon of the UEG. That box that got busted in the post office? It had some sort of shape-shifting android in it. It can alter its appearance to look like anyone apparently."

Cassandra blinked. "Oh, what does it want? I mean, why kidnap Gelissia?"

"According to Davon, it is programed to destroy Trilyns."

"Oh, Nadarr, we have to go get your sister back from it before it kills her then!" Cassandra pushed off his chest and scooted off the bed, picking up her clothes to get dressed again.

"You'll help me?"

"Of course." She smiled. "If it's an android, then maybe I should grab my taser. The electricity in it might interrupt the thing's circuits."

"Where is it?"

"Back at the bakery, it's on the way and it won't take me a minute to grab it."

Nadarr nodded as he too dressed. "I went armed last time, but I am going to grab a different blaster, one that will also effect the circuitry of the android."

Cassandra waited by the door as he went into the armory and switched his weapons. He returned with a long sword attached to his left hip as well and looked pretty sexy with it, like a twenty-second century pirate. She giggled to herself and then took his offered hand as they left the ship.

Her heart felt much lighter now as they walked through the forest. She hadn't been paying a lot of attention on the way to the ship, but now she realized they weren't actually that far from town. Not if they took a different, lesser known path, one that didn't wind so much. When they reached the fork in the path, she tugged his hand toward the shortcut, but he resisted.

"That's the wrong way," he said, stopping where he stood. "I took it and had to backtrack."

Cassandra frowned. "What do you mean you had to backtrack? You couldn't get through?"

"Well, no, I just realized it wasn't the right path, so I came back here and went that way." He pointed toward the other winding path.

Smiling, she tugged him forward again toward her shortcut. "Your instincts were right to go down this one here. This path is actually a more direct route, it will take about twenty-five minutes off our walk."

He chuckled. "I'm not used to trusting my instincts on directions. I always end up lost."

"You wouldn't have this time." She squeezed his fingers. "I know these woods well, I played in them as a child, it's how I found the cottage I turned into my bakery and apartment. My parents told me it used to belong to an elderly woman who didn't like living in town. I don't remember her, but they told me she used to dress up as a witch every Halloween and pass out candy."

"What happened to her?" Nadarr asked.

"I guess she died when I was like three or four. The cottage had been vacant until I bought it after graduating high school. My parents helped me buy it and renovate it, but then they died before I really made a go of it. They were always very supportive of me and my ambitions."

"I'm sorry they passed away. I would have liked to have met them."

Cassandra smiled. "I think they would have really liked you, Nadarr."

Nadarr shook his head and gave her a sad smile. "Probably not after the way I treated you." His voice was soft and full of recrimination toward himself.

Feeling chagrinned, Cassandra stopped and pulled him to a stop as well. "Listen to me, Nadarr. I do not blame you. Anyone would have reacted the same or more than likely much worse than you did. You didn't hurt me physically, yes, your words hurt at the time, but I've forgiven you and you need to forgive yourself." She reached up and stroked his cheek. "If you don't it's going to make you bitter and resentful, and I don't want that."

Nadarr took a moment and met her gaze, then nodded. "Alright. I don't want that either. I promise I will forgive myself eventually, but I need to feel bad about it for a little while, okay?"

Cassandra gave him an exasperated look but then shook her head and smiled. "Alright. Just don't think that my parents wouldn't like you because of it. You made a mistake, you're hum— er, well, you aren't

human, but I think the old adage applies. Shit happens." She laughed. "Come on, let's keep going or it will be full dark by the time we get there."

"Right."

They continued on and ten minutes later found the bakery. She ran inside and grabbed her taser then joined him again outside and they hurried toward the town. The sun was going down now, and she was starving, but they needed to go get rid of the android and get Gelissia back. Eating could wait.

Finally they reached the mill and hadn't run into any of the parishioners, thankfully. She wasn't sure she could keep her zen attitude going if they were going to be shouting 'burn the witch' at her. "When you went in before, did you go through this door?" She pointed at the main entrance.

"Yes, do you have a better way in?"

"If the android is expecting you to come in through here, and was prepared with a gun aimed here, we should go in from the side entrance. Maybe the android was expecting you not to know another way in."

"Maybe. Show me where you think we should enter."

Cassandra was glad that he was listening to her, allowing her to help him get his sister back. It made her feel like they were a team. She took him around the side of the mill to a side entrance that the workers used to use. "The door sticks a little, but one really good tug should get it open."

Nadarr nodded, gripped the door with both hands and pulled hard. The door flew open without making too much noise. He went in first with his blaster out of its holster and pointed toward the interior of the building. He waved her in behind him. "Stay behind me," he whispered.

Cassandra wasn't going to argue. They moved forward through the side room toward the main area where the milling used to take place. As they passed through a door, she heard a muffled grunt to her left. She stopped and put a hand on Nadarr's arm to stop him too. It was too dark to see much so she paused and listened. The sound came again, and she patted his arm, then pointed.

"I think that might be Gelissia, it sounded too human, I mean… damn, you know what I mean."

Nadarr smiled and nodded. Together they cautiously moved toward the sound. Which sounded more like groans of pain now the closer they got. Finally, they could see what was making the noise. It was Gelissia tied up, her mouth gagged, as she struggled to sit up.

"Lissi!" Nadarr said dropping to her side.

Cassandra dropped down too and freed her feet from the ropes tying them together. Just as she got her feet free, a shotgun blast sounded and the concrete three feet from them jumped leaving a small crater. "Nadarr!"

"Get her out of here, Cassie." Nadarr jumped up and turned, pointing his blaster toward where the shot had come from. He pulled the trigger, and something sparked about fifteen feet away.

Cassandra pulled Gelissia to her feet, wrapped her arm around her waist and ran with her as best she could back toward the door they'd come in through. Gelissia struggled, her hands were still tied

behind her back and her mouth was still gagged. Once they made it through the doors, Gelissia collapsed to the ground, as if she'd expended all the energy she had. Cassandra had to wonder if that was part of the side effects of whatever drug the android had give her.

Dropping down next to her again, Cassandra worked at the knot in the dirty rag the android had used to gag her. Once she had the nasty thing off Gelissia's mouth, she went to work on her hands, breaking a nail as she dug into the rope to get it untied. "I am so sorry this happened to you," she murmured as she worked at the knot.

"Cassie, you have to go back in and help Nadarr, that thing isn't human! It's a machine that can change its appearance!" Gelissia panted. "It said it was going to destroy us."

"I know, I mean we know. The UEG said they are all over the US right now doing this to a bunch of Trilyn nationals. I'll go help Nadarr, but I'm so glad you're okay." Cassandra hugged her and then jumped up and ran back inside.

Pulling the taser as she entered the main room, Cassandra could see Nadarr had gotten the weapon away from the android, but his blaster was gone too and he was using his sword, only his swings were missing, which Cassandra assumed was because the android was so fast. It had one arm dangling at its side where he must have gotten it with the blaster earlier. She ran toward them, waiting for a chance to help and while he had the android distracted, she pulled the trigger on the taser. Electric coils shot forward and attached themselves to the body of the android which eerily looked quite a bit like her.

The android froze and then began to violently shake and suddenly, the 'skin' recoiled into the body of the android, and it returned to what must have been its default state. It was a shiny metal, with a grill like mouth and a rectangular screen for eyes. All Cassandra could do was stare at the thing, it looked so strange. And the next thing she knew, Nadarr's sword was flying toward the android's neck and decapitating it.

Relief flooded her and she moved toward him. He reached for her and wrapped his large hand around the side of her head and neck, pulling her into him as he kissed her. "Thank goodness you're alright. How's Lissi? Is she okay? Where is she?"

"She's fine, exhausted I think, but fine. I got her free. She's waiting outside."

Sighing, Nadarr picked up the android head and they left the mill. "Ugh. That was harder than anything I've ever done in my life. She looked so much like you… I just couldn't… I wouldn't have been able to do that if she'd still looked like you," he said softly as he lifted the android head by the now severed wires.

"Then I'm glad I was here to help and make it turn back to its default state." Cassandra smiled as she and Nadarr joined Gelissia. She was so glad it was over, and everyone was safe. She was most glad because she and Nadarr were back on the right track, and she knew they were meant to be together. She could now see herself by his side, fighting and loving together for years to come. She couldn't wait to tell him, yes.

CHAPTER 19

NADARR

"Lissi, are you alright?" Nadarr asked as soon as he reached Gelissia's side. He dropped the android's head to the ground and moved to help Gelissia up from the ground. He checked her over and noticed several darkening bruises on her arms and face. "What in all of Trilyn did that thing do to you!"

Gelissia patted his arm. "I've been better. That thing…" She shook her head and held onto her ribs. "She took me by surprise. Knocked on the door and when I looked, I though it was Cassie, but I knew the minute she spoke it wasn't her. I tried to shove the door closed, but she stabbed me with some kind of needle that drugged me."

"If I hadn't killed her already, I'd kill her," Nadarr snarled.

Rubbing the top of her head, she continued, "She must have pulled my hair too, because my head really hurts."

"We saw it on the bed and breakfast's surveillance camera, she dragged you down the hall by your hair," Cassie said softly. "I'm so sorry."

"Why? You didn't do it." Gelissia smiled.

"I know, but it was my face."

"Stop, she may have worn your face, but she wasn't you. As I said, I could tell the moment she spoke, it was almost robotic, which given that she's an android, that makes some sense. She didn't have your inflection and tone right. If I'd been faster, I would have taken her out and you both wouldn't have had to come rescue me." She shook her head and frowned. "I was so groggy when I woke, which I think it wasn't expecting. She tried to be you, but I called her on it, and she changed to that Reverend Brown, then to Mrs. Freeman as she punched and kicked me while I was tied up, then she gagged me."

"Lissi, I should have been there to stop her." Nadarr felt terrible for having left her on her own.

"I'm glad you weren't because that was the only reason she didn't kill me outright. I was terrified when you came in that first time. I could see you and that Reverend, why didn't you bring Cassie then?"

Nadarr felt his face heat up and he hung his head. "I… we all thought it was Cassie who took you."

"What did you do, Nadarr?" Gelissia pursed her lips at him. "How could you even think it was Cassie when you were with her?"

"Because I was an idiot."

"And you aren't still?" Gelissia smirked.

Cassie giggled. "In his defense, that video was pretty damning. However, he realized his mistake and we've made up, for the most part."

"For the most part?" Nadarr's eyebrows rose. Had she not quite forgiven him as she said she had?

"Still considering your proposal… remember?" She grinned, teasing him.

Nadarr narrowed his eyes at her. "Need I kiss you again to get you to decide?"

Her grin widened. "Couldn't hurt." She laughed.

"Come here." He curled his finger at her and pointed at the ground directly in front of him.

Walking over to him and tilting her face up, that teasing light in her eyes, she said, "What?"

Nadarr wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into him then lowered his head and pressed his lips to hers. A moment later she slid her hands up his chest and tangled her fingers in his hair. He lifted her up and she wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Ahem! Break it up, you two."

Nadarr broke the kiss and Cassie giggled. "Still considering?"

"No. I've made up my mind."

"And are you going to tell me your answer?" Nadarr gazed into her eyes as she grinned.

"Not yet."

He laughed and set her down. "Come on, let's take this thing to the sheriff."

"Good idea," Cassie replied. "You okay to go with us Gelissia?"

"You may call me Lissi. You're going to be my sister after all." Gelissia smiled and reached for Cassie's hand, squeezing her fingers.

"I've never had a sister. I think we'll get on well," Cassie replied, her grin wider on her face.

"Especially if you make those double chocolate brownies for me." Gelissia laughed. "I could really go for one of those right now."

"We'll go see the sheriff then head to the bakery, I have a platter of them already made."

"Sounds good." Gelissia nodded.

Nadarr picked the head up again by the dangling wires and they headed for the station. They pushed through the doors and were met by the deputy, Officer Myers.

"Where's the sheriff?"

"I see you recovered your sister, um, what's that?" Officer Myers asked, seeing the head.

Holding it up, Nadarr said, "This is the head of the android that kidnapped my sister. We want to give it to the sheriff for safekeeping until the UEG can get here to collect it."

Officer Myers rubbed his neck and looked a bit sheepish. "He's er… not here. He's actually at your bakery, Ms. Moon."

"What? Why?"

"The Reverend and his parishioners are pretty wound up demanding he take you into custody."

Cassie sighed. "Nadarr?"

"Yes, my love?"

"Please marry me and take me out of this freaking town."

Nadarr chuckled. "As you wish, my love. First let's go stop the mob from destroying your bakery, shall we?"

Cassie nodded and gripped his hand tighter.

"Are all you humans so paranoid?" Gelissia asked, staring at Officer Myers.

"We aren't all assholes. Promise." He smiled.

"Thanks, Officer Myers."

They headed out and straight for The Little Dipper Bakery. Fifteen minutes later they arrived to find the Reverend and his parishioners surrounding her bakery and the sheriff standing between them and the front door.

"Now calm down, Reverend! I can't have you vandalizing property!"

"Thou shall not suffer a witch to live!"

"The witch is a kidnapper!"

"You need to arrest her, Sheriff! She broke the law!"

"If that alien isn't going to kill her you need to arrest her!"

"People, you need to remain calm! Prince Nadarr assured me he has Ms. Moon secured."

Gelissia growled and pushed through the crowd of parishioners to stand next to the sheriff. "Cassie did not kidnap me! I was kidnapped by a damn android from the Morse Corporation! The same Morse Corporation owned by the now deceased Julia Morse who was determined to destroy the relationship between Earth and Trilyn!" she shouted.

"You're lying!"

"How dare you question my integrity!" Gelissia snarled.

"Forgive my flock, Princess Gelissia, however, we find it odd that the video clearly showed Cassandra Moon drugging you. Perhaps you are confused?"

"I am not!"

Nadarr tossed the android head at the Reverend, and when he caught it, the android's face assimilated to match his. The Reverend immediately dropped it, but it remained in his image.

"What in all that is holy is that heathen thing?" the Reverend demanded.

"That, sir, Sheriff, is the head of the android that I killed to retrieve my sister."

The parishioners gasped and began crossing themselves and several fled from the scene.

"Make it go away!" the Reverend demanded. "What kind of voodoo is this? Have you laid a hex upon me? I demand you stop it right now Ms. Moon!"

"What? Don't be ridiculous!" Cassie sputtered.

The sheriff approached it cautiously and picked it up. The face immediately changed to match his and he dropped it. "What in the hell?"

"It's programed to take the form of whoever it touches. However if you pick it up by the wires, it will return to its original state, Sheriff," Nadarr explained.

"How did you figure this out?"

"After my first attempt to recover my sister, I called my brother, who patched me into Agent David Davon of the UEG. He explained about the android. In fact, he'll be wanting to collect this head and probably the body as evidence, would you take care of keeping it safe, Sheriff? Just, for the safety of all Trilyns, please keep the head and body separate."

"If you'll excuse me," the Reverend murmured and quickly left with the rest of the parishioners following close behind him.

The sheriff rolled his eyes and lifted the head by the wires. The face immediately returned to it's original state. "So interesting. Yes, I'll keep this safe. Agent Davon you said?"

"Yes, of the UEG."

"I'll send a couple of deputies over to recover the body. How did you manage to take it down?"

Nadarr smiled. "Cassie shot it with a taser, disrupting its circuitry and I decapitated it with my sword." He placed a hand on the hilt.

The sheriff eyed the weapon and asked with a grin, "You got a license for that?"

"He just saved my life and you're asking if he has a license!" Gelissia huffed, her face contorting in anger.

"Lissi," Cassie put a hand on her arm as she softly said, "Sheriff Katz is only teasing. You don't have to have a license for a sword."

Gelissia immediately backed down. "Oh."

"Well, I'll let you folks go in and enjoy the rest of your evening."

"Thank you, Sheriff."

Gelissia turned to go with him.

"Where are you going, Lissi?" Cassie asked.

Gelissia shrugged. "Back to the bed and breakfast. I assumed the two of you would like to be alone."

Smiling, Cassie shook her head. "You are welcome here too. In fact, why don't you stay in my guest room?"

She arched her brow but then nodded. "Then I will go check out of the bed and breakfast and return with our things." She glanced up at the sky and then back down. "I'll return in an hour's time." With that, she hurried to catch up to the sheriff and walked with him.

They watched her for a moment and then Nadarr said, "A whole hour of alone time… how shall we fill it?" He wiggled his brows at Cassie.

Cassie laughed as Nadarr scooped her up, and she opened the door while cradled in his arms. Shoving and locking the door, he swept through the bakery with her in his arms and up the stairs to her room where he deposited her on the bed. They made quick work of getting out of their clothes and then fell into each other's arms.

Nadarr covered her body in kisses, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. "Did you mean it?"

Breathless, Cassie asked, "Did I mean what?"

"That you want to marry me?"

She nodded, a wide smile gracing her lips. "Every word. And not just because the townspeople here are idiots." Her hand cupped his face and she gazed into his eyes. "I've fallen in love with you, Nadarr. I know it's crazy, it's only been a few days, but I have. I think you were made for me."

Nadarr felt his heart swell. "I have fallen in love with you as well, my sweet Cassie. You are everything I ever imagined in a wife. Everything I could have asked for and then some. You are my one true mate, my one true love. I will do everything in my power to make you happy always." He leaned down and kissed her gently and then as his tongue tangoed with hers, he buried his thick cock inside her slick pussy and together they thrust their hips cresting the waves of pleasure until they both reached the pinnacle of their orgasm and crashed together as they cried out, "I love you!"

Ten minutes later, they lay together completely spent and happy.

CHAPTER 20

CASSANDRA

ONE WEEK LATER

"Cassie, my love," Nadarr started, "the ship is nearly full. Is there anything else cooking wise that you need to add?"

Cassandra never got tired of hearing him call her 'my love'. "Well… there is still the whole cabinet full of my ingredients and the stockpots, oh and all the bakeware…" she replied as she tried to picture what she hadn't packed yet.

"Hello?" Gelissia called from the bottom of the stairs. "Are you two up there having sex again? I swear you're like a couple of gwendals!"

Cassie looked at Nadarr and laughed. "What's a gwendal?"

He chuckled too. "I think you have a similar mammal here on Earth called a rabbit?"

Cassie laughed harder. "Come on up, Lissi, I promise it's safe!"

"No! Don't! She's making it up!" Nadarr called out, his grin going wide across his face as he picked her up and tickled her.

"Shut up!" Cassie had tears running down her cheeks from laughing so much. "Put me down! Put me down!"

"Yeah, I'm just going to wait down here until you're done! I'll go finish packing up the bakeware!" Gelissia called out, her voice fading as she moved from the bottom of the stairs.

Nadarr set her down but kept his arms around her. He leaned down and kissed her lips, nipping at her as he trailed kisses from her lips to her neck.

"You know we're never going to finish packing if you don't stop." She giggled.

Nadarr sighed. "I know." He moved toward the bed and sat down, pulling her down in his lap. "You know, I'm not sure we can bring everything on this trip. There won't be any room for us in the ship."

Cassie frowned. "But—"

"I know, you need it all." He nodded. "Lissi took that last load, we'll go see what she says about how much room is left. Maybe I'm wrong."

Cassie hopped up, took his hand and they headed down to the bakery kitchen. They found her boxing the baking ware cabinet. "So is this all going to fit? We still have to get all the ingredients too."

Gelissia stopped packing and smiled. "You don't have to worry about that. I called in reinforcements."

"You did?" Nadarr frowned.

"Floran and Amara will be here within the hour." Gelissia went back to packing.

"When did you call?" Nadarr questioned. He appeared stunned by his sister's answer.

"The night you killed the android."

"And you didn't tell me?" He gasped.

She laughed. "You were busy."

Nadarr's cheeks colored, and he looked at Cassie shyly before turning back to his sister. "You've had week to tell me!"

"True, but then you wouldn't be panicking about the ship filling up and it's been quite amusing to watch you figure out creative ways to fill the ship with all of Cassie's things."

Nadarr shook his head and sat down on one of the stools. "So we've been packing all this into the ship, and we aren't even going to be taking it back to Trilyn, are we?" He narrowed his eyes at her.

She smiled. "Oh, we are, but Floran said we can just park it in the bay of his. You know his ship it huge."

"Wait, we're not flying on your cozy ship?" Cassie asked, looking between the twins.

Gelissia laughed. "Wait until you see Floran's ship. Trust me, you're going to flip. It's like a palace. Four levels including the docking bay. There's a garden, suites of rooms, a ballroom, formal dining area, huge kitchens, which you are going to love, and so much more."

"A garden on a ship?" Cassie's eyes widened. She'd seen pictures of some of the Trilyn Princes' ships, but she didn't know what all they contained. "Wow."

"Plus this frees Nadarr up from navigation, which he's terrible at anyway, and having to watch the controls." Gelissia grinned.

"Hey, I can navigate!" Nadarr sputtered.

"No, you can't. And that's okay, brother, you have other skills." Gelissia smiled at him.

Nadarr sighed.

"So, does this mean I can take everything then?" Cassie asked hopeful.

"Every single piece of equipment. I don't want you unable to bake me those delicious treats!" Gelissia replied.

"You'd think you were the one marrying her!" Nadarr commented.

"If you didn't I would. Those brownies are worth it!" Gelissia teased.

Cassie laughed. She hadn't felt this much love since her family was alive. And now she had a new family, and she was going to meet a new brother and sister-in-law. She couldn't wait. Nadarr had told her about them, how they were both doctors, and both working to save a group of women infected with Morse Corporation nanites that put them into comas. Sadly, Amara had been one of the infected, but according to Nadarr, his brother had developed a treatment for her that was working.

"Where are they going to park? Did you think of that?" Nadarr asked, his eyes narrowed at his sister.

"Yes, and I already cleared it with the sheriff. That field between the old mill and the ice rink. Technically he's not going to come all the way down, just going to use the new tech that will allow him to send three legs down and rest the ship on them, so it'll be about forty feet in the air above everything."

"So we still have to fly my ship over to his then."

"Yes, but it also means that we can fill the bedrooms with Cassie's things."

Nadarr nodded. "Alright. That works, I suppose."

Cassie bit her lip. "Are you upset?"

Nadarr paused and then shook his head. "No, I'm not upset. Surprised, happily actually. It was considerate of you to think of this solution, Lissi. Thank you."

"I did it for Cassie, not you." Gelissia smirked. "But you're welcome."

Nadarr rolled his eyes.

They continued packing until there was a knock on the door. Cassie wiped her hands off, left the bakery kitchen and headed for the door. Three people stood outside as a gentle snow fell. Opening the door, she smiled. "Hello, I'm Cassandra Moon. You must be Prince Floran, and do you prefer Princess or Doctor Amara?" She looked at the other man with them and waited, because she didn't know who he was.

"Just Amara is fine," the beautiful dark haired woman said. "This is Special Agent David Davon of the UEG."

"Oh, it's lovely to meet you." Cassandra shook the Prince's hand, then the Agent's. "Please come in."

They entered the fairly empty bakery and followed her to the kitchen. "Sorry about the mess, but we're still packing my things up."

"Gelissia said you were a baker?" Floran asked, his eyes scanning the room.

"Yes."

"Do you plan to open a bakery on Trilyn?" Amara asked, her pale blue eyes lit with excitement.

"She'd better," Gelissia commented as she came out of the pantry with a handful of things. "I don't think I would make it another day without her brownies. They are the most delicious thing I've ever eaten."

"She even said she'd marry Cassie just to get those brownies," Nadarr teased.

Cassie laughed.

"They must be exceptional then." Floran smiled.

"I will make a batch soon, well, I suppose soon is relative, considering I've never space traveled before." Cassie blushed.

"You have full use of the kitchens on our ship," Amara offered. "If Lissi says they are the best thing in the world, I have to try them."

Cassie blushed again. "Alright, I will just make sure we pack those ingredients together along with the proper pans." She turned toward the boxes.

"Nadarr, you remember Special Agent David Davon?"

"Yes, hello. What brings you by?" Nadarr asked, looking curious.

Cassandra had to admit she was quite curious about his appearance in her kitchen as well.

"I'm here to pick up the android from your local Sheriff, but I also have some news. Unfortunately, it's not great news."

"Oh, that sounds ominous," Cassandra murmured as she moved closer to Nadarr.

"It seems that more of those boxes went out before we could get anyone close to the Morse Corporation to stop them from being shipped. We were finally able to raid the buildings, but it seems about seven hundred of those androids were shipped out around the world. And considering what those things can do, well, it's like they can hide in plain sight." Agent Davon sighed and dragged a hand through his thick dark hair.

"What does this mean then?" Floran asked.

"It means you'll need to warn any Trilyns coming to Earth to be aware they are out there, and what they can do. I'm hoping with the recovered androids we have so far, our scientists can figure out a way to track them and destroy them, but for now, we need the Trilyns to be cautious."

"I will be sure I tell the ruling Princes and get the word out to our people," Floran replied.

"Thank you, now, I want to wish you all a safe trip back to Trilyn, and I will leave you to finish your packing. I want to head out before this snowstorm really hits here."

"I'll walk you out," Nadarr said, moving toward the entrance of the kitchen.

"Where can we start helping?" Amara asked.

Cassandra directed her and Floran to start on the pantry while she and Gelissia found the ingredients for the brownies and boxed them separately. With the extra hands, they had the entire bakery and her apartment completely packed within a few hours.

Cassie was thrilled to be making a final sweep of the now empty bakery and apartment. Floran had even insisted they take the custom made ovens as he knew one of his cousins would be able to help configure a way to get them to work on Trilyn. The last thing she had to grab was her sign from outside above the door that hung on two chains.

"Is this it?" Nadarr asked, looking up at the sign.

She nodded. "Yep. Will you lift me up so I can grab it?"

Nadarr grinned and boosted her up in his arms.

Sliding the chains off their hooks, Cassie pulled the sign down and then slid down his body. "Thank you." She pushed up on her toes and kissed him softly.

When they broke apart, Nadarr said, "Shall we?" He held out his hand for her to take.

Cassie slid her hand into his, and with a thrill of excitement racing through her, they headed for his ship to fly it over to Floran's larger one. She glanced over her shoulder once to take a last look at the little cottage that had been her life for what felt like forever. She felt good about the decision to marry Nadarr and she had no regrets.

TWO DAYS LATER

Cassandra couldn't believe it. This kitchen was huge. She set the box with her brownie ingredients on the counter.

"Princess Cassandra, is there anything you need help with?" Floran's chef asked.

"Oh, Chef Branlin," Cassandra smiled, "I need to know how the temperature and cooking time differs on your ovens."

"Of course." He explained as he showed her the controls and how to set them to the exact temperature and for how long. The conversion from cooking on Earth with Earth equipment to cooking on a Trilyn ship with Trilyn equipment was fairly easy once you understood how it all worked.

"Thank you." Cassandra smiled and then, after washing up, began putting together her ingredients. Chef Branlin kept an eye upon what she was doing, looking very curious as she mixed up the ingredients.

"There is my lovely bride," Nadarr said as he came into the kitchen and dipped his finger in the batter on the spoon she was holding.

Cassie tapped his hand as he went for a second dip. "Hey, stop that," she said with a giggle. "I wasn't done using that."

His eyes lit up. "But you are now?"

"Now that you've stuck your fingers in it, yes." She laughed and handed him the spoon.

"Nadarr, you better not be eating all of that batter!" Gelissia said joining them.

Cassie sighed, dipped another spoon in the batter and handed it to Lissi. "Here, now you both have one."

Lissi grinned, took a lick of the spoon and closed her eyes like she was in heaven. "Oh my stars and heavens that is so good. The only thing better is when they're baked."

Cassie caught Chef Branlin eyeing the batter and looking envious. Rolling her eyes, she picked up a third spoon, dipped it in the batter and handed it to him. "No more, now all of you shoo until I can get this in the pan and in the oven."

"Yes ma'am." Gelissia leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Hey, don't kiss my bride, that's my job." Nadarr chuckled.

Cassandra laughed as he pulled her into his arms and then kissed her properly. "Mmmm. You taste like chocolate."

"You taste delicious," he murmured back.

Cassandra blushed.

"Okay, you, out. Cassie has brownies to bake!" Gelissia pulled on his arm and began to shove him out of the kitchen.

Shaking her head, Cassandra went back to pouring the batter into the pan and then she checked the oven to be sure it was set correctly and put the brownies in. She cleaned up her mess and put her ingredients away as she waited for them to cook.

Chef Branlin helped her clean up and they discussed the ingredients while they waited. Once they were done, she pulled them out to cool, setting them on the cooling racks. While they cooled, she prepared the frosting.

"There's more?"

"For my double chocolate brownies, yes. I top it with my homemade chocolate fudge frosting."

Once again, Chef Branlin watched her prepare the frosting and then after making sure the brownies were cool, she spread the frosting on them and sliced them into squares. She handed one to the Chef and watched as he ate it. His eyes closed as he chewed, and he made a groaning sound.

"That is a delicious experience. Would you be willing to share your recipe with me?"

Cassandra smiled. "Of course. Just don't go passing it around or my bakery might go under before I even get started." She laughed.

After plating five more brownies, and putting the remainder away for later, she headed toward the large living room where the twins, Prince Floran and Amara were conversing. "Who wants a double chocolate brownie?" she inquired, holding out the plate.

All four of them hopped up and reached for the plate, leaving one for her. She picked it up and sat down next to Nadarr. Smiling she sank into the plush sofa and took a bite of her brownie, enjoying the flavor as it coated her tongue.

"Didn't I tell you?" Gelissia said, as she took another bite.

"These are wonderful," Amara commented.

"If this is a sample of the baked goods you'll carry in your bakery, then it will be a massive success, Cassandra," Floran commented.

"Thank you." Cassandra blushed under their praise.

"Outstanding, my love." Nadarr put his arm around her and kissed her. He turned back to the others, and said, "If you'll excuse us." He stood up, picked Cassie up and headed for their suites.

Cassandra laughed as she waved to his siblings. "Nadarr, what are you doing?"

"Showing my bride how much I love her and how proud I am to be with her."

He pushed the door to their suite open and then strode to their bedroom which held a large king sized bed with plush bedding and tons of pillows. It was a room meant for a Prince, which, considering he was one, it was perfect. He set her on the bed and swiftly undressed her.

They spent the next few hours making love. Cassandra reached for her crystal and held it as she lay wrapped in Nadarr's arms. She thanked the heavens and the stars for sending him to rescue her from a life that wasn't really a life. She could not believe how much joy she woke with every day now. He brought absolute joy to her life, and she was so grateful to have found him.

"I love you, Nadarr."

"And I love you, my sweet little kitchen witch." He kissed her forehead and smiled.

Cassandra snuggled into him and knew she'd always be loved here in his arms.

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